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# 'Human Development': The Power of the Idea<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** The idea of human development, and the related index, has been developed and promoted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) largely through its annual *Human Development Reports*. In recent years it has become more closely associated with the work of Amartya Sen. Initially, the concept formed an important part of the counter-discourse against the dominant perspective associated with the Bretton Woods Institutions. Since then, the policies and perspectives of both the UNDP and the World Bank have to some extent changed, and much has been built on the foundations of this concept — both by bureaucrats and academics. The aim of this paper is to critically assess this process. The paper draws a comparison with findings from the author's earlier research on a number of other influential ideas in development policy, such as 'social capital', and suggests that 'human development' has generally fared rather better.

**Key words:** Ideas, Policy, Distortion, Philosophy, Power, Politics, Amartya Sen, Mahbub ul Haq, Human development, Human Development Index, Human Development Report

## Introduction

... the fate awaiting any term being a great success in its time. It becomes the plaything of dilettantism and is elevated to an agent providing the hypnotic power of opium. ... The greatest success an instrument can have is to become a fetish. Then it is done for, however. (Schumpeter, 2005, p. 119)<sup>2</sup>

The first *Human Development Report* (HDR) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was published in 1990. This marked the launch of what proved to be a most influential concept. According to three of those who played a most active role in its promotion, namely Mahbub ul Haq, Amartya Sen and Paul Streeten:

After many decades of development, we are rediscovering the obvious – that people are both the means and the end of development. (Haq, 1995, p. 3)

The concept of human development draws on the greatness of human potentiality despite our narrowly circumscribed lives. (Sen, 2006, p. 256)

Human development puts people back at centre stage. (Streeten, 1995, p. x)

There can be little doubt that the concept of ‘human development’ has had a profound influence on thinking about development. My aim in this paper is to critically assess why this is so, but also to assess its current standing. In this analysis, I shall draw on findings from my earlier research on other influential ideas in development policy, notably ‘the informal sector’, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘social capital’.

Sen identifies Haq as “the pioneering leader of the human development approach” (Sen, 2006, p. 256). He traces the roots of this approach to a number of earlier and related concepts — basic needs, physical quality of life, disparities in living conditions — and notes the contribution of some international organizations (such as UNICEF), and relief organizations (such as OXFAM), as well as “humanists voicing the need for social justice.” At the end of his list he includes (presumably referring to himself, among others) “also some obdurate theory spinners wondering whether the foundations of economic and social evaluation could not be radically shifted from commodities to capabilities.” According to Sen: “The human development approach, under Mahbub ul Haq’s stewardship, tried to make room for all these concerns” (Sen, 2006, p. 257).

Haq, in his book *Reflections on Human Development*, explains the background, which may be briefly summarized as follows:

After the Second World War, however, an obsession grew with economic growth models and national income accounts. ... People as the agents of change and of development were often forgotten. ... The late 1980s were ripe for a counter-offensive. It was becoming obvious in several countries that human lives were shriveling even as economic production was expanding. (Haq, 1995, p. 24)

New questions were being raised about the character, distribution and quality of economic growth. ... In this favorable climate, I presented the idea of preparing an annual human development report to the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, William Draper III, in the spring of 1989. (Haq, 1995, p. 25)

Haq had a distinguished career, not only as a professional economist, but also — for 10 years — as a politician in Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> Based on this experience, he became increasingly disillusioned with conventional mainstream economic thinking and its power to bring about development. As he put it: “When rapid economic growth during the 1960s failed to translate into improvements in the lives of Pakistan’s masses, I was forced to challenge many of the premises of my initial work” (Haq, 1995, p. xvii). His transition from mainstream to critic may be traced in three books that he wrote over a 20-year period (Haq, 1963, 1976; Haq and Streeten, 1982).

On receiving the go-ahead to work on the HDR, Haq contacted Amartya Sen and others to assist him in the task. Sen refers to “repeated phone calls from ul Haq in summer 1989” (Sen, 2000, p. 17). Others, such as Frances Stewart and Gustav Ranis, were already involved through their participation in a series of North–South roundtables organized by Haq in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Together with Paul Streeten, they and others in the 1970s had collaborated with Haq (then at the World Bank) in work on basic needs. In brief, then, the concept of human development may be attributed to the “visionary Pakistani economist, Mahbub ul Haq, who died in 1998” (Sen, 2006, p. 256). Haq was centrally placed in the United Nations development policy system, and in a position to draw on the intellectual resources of a small group of other well-respected economists.

Equally important — in addition to the concept itself and the HDRs — was the associated Human Development Index (HDI), developed by Sen and others.<sup>5</sup> “The search for a new composite index of socio-economic progress began in earnest in preparing the *Human Development Report ...* in 1989” (Haq, 1995, p. 47). The HDI was included in the first HDR, published in 1990. It proved to be a very powerful complement to the concept of human development: “One of the most influential devices — though also one of the most controversial — has been the Human Development Index and the ranking of countries by this index” (*op. cit.*, p. 45).

To quote Streeten:

The item in UNDP’s Human Development Report that has caught the public’s eye and caused the most controversy is the Human Development Index ... Such indexes are useful in focusing attention and simplifying problems. They are eye-catching. They have considerable political appeal. (Streeten, 1995, p. xi)

The success of human development lay in its ability to bridge the gap between research and policy. The concept ‘human development’, and the associated HDI, are seen as very relevant to development policy, while firmly grounded in academic terms. Haq had the ability to build the bridge; while others, notably Sen, provided academic authority. In the rest of this paper, I shall expand on this brief assessment, drawing on my earlier study of other concepts that have played a major role in

development thinking in recent decades. I begin with a brief summary of this research and its findings.

### The CANDID project

The aim of CANDID (Creation, Adoption, Negation and Distortion of Ideas in Development) was to study the relationship between ‘ideas’ and development assistance through a system-wide approach to the use and abuse of ‘ideas’ in the major multilateral institutions. Many of the results are presented in *Global Institutions and Development: Framing the World?*, edited by Morten Bøås and Desmond McNeill (2004). In a subsequent article also based on the research, in *Global Social Policy* (McNeill, 2006), I include a bibliometric analysis — quantifying the rate and extent of take-off of three ideas: the informal sector, sustainable development and social capital. Figure 1 illustrates the picture for ‘social capital’. I have not undertaken a similar analysis for ‘human development’, but there is no doubt that the term has experienced very rapid growth from the mid-1990s onwards.

I shall here briefly summarize some of the findings from this study, in order to see whether they may also be applicable to the ‘idea’ of human development. In the CANDID project we defined an ‘idea’ rather precisely as “a concept which powerfully influences development policy. It is more than simply a slogan or ‘buzzword’ because it has some reputable intellectual basis, but it may nevertheless be found to be vulnerable on analytical or empirical grounds. What is special about such an idea is that it is able to operate in both academic and policy domains ...” (Bøås and

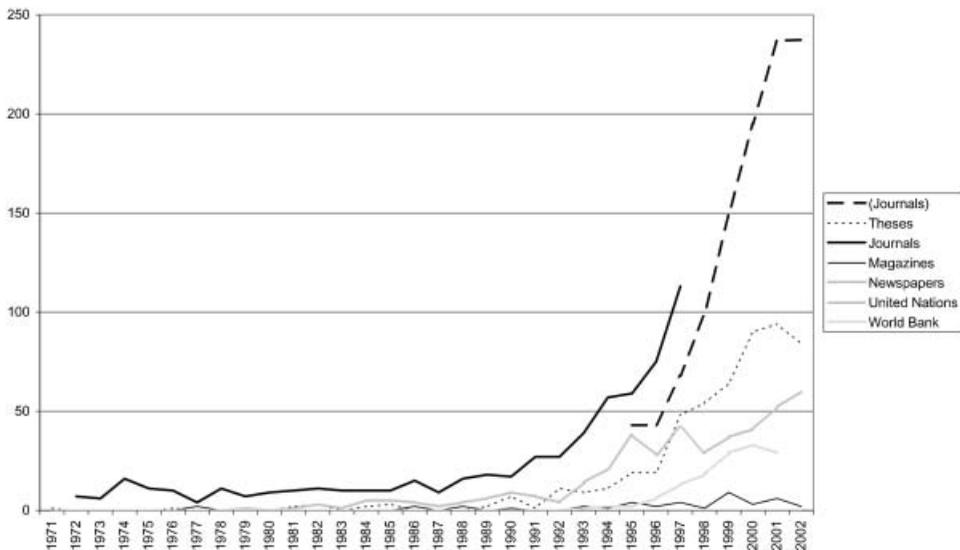


FIGURE 1. Usage of the term ‘social capital’.

McNeill, 2004, p. 1). I believe this definition fits very well the concept of human development, and I shall therefore refer to human development as an 'idea' in the rest of this paper.

One of our findings is that, in order to be successful, an idea has to have institutional backing. By a successful idea we mean one that strongly influences the development agenda. To what extent it influences practice on the ground and ultimately improves peoples' lives is not part of this, rather particular, definition. In the case of 'social capital', the institutional backing came from the World Bank. For 'sustainable development' it was the combination of the World Commission on Environment and Development (chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland) and the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio. For "the informal sector" it was the International Labour Organisation. From an academic point of view, the merit of an idea lies, ideally, in its analytical clarity and rigor. It is therefore interesting (although in my view regrettable) to observe that some of the most successful ideas in the realm of development policy are those that are broad and ill-defined (McNeill, 2004).<sup>6</sup>

In our study, we draw on the work of writers in the Neo-Gramscian tradition, such as Robert Cox (e.g. 1986), to understand the process of 'framing' that is involved in the adoption of such ideas. A concept such as 'sustainable development' frames our thought in two ways: first, by placing the issue on the agenda, and, second, by shaping the way we think about it. Furthermore, it shapes not only thought but also action. Yet, there is a tendency for this process to involve a distortion of the ideas, as we observed in the CANDID project. Their potential to bring about substantial change may be gradually subverted. One way in which this happens is that ideas become blurred and blunted — new concepts are used loosely, over-extended into areas that are unsuitable, and so forth. This happens largely because of a desire to achieve consensus, and attract a larger constituency of support, and even, perhaps, as an intentional strategy by others to weaken the idea's influence. Another process that can occur is that, as they become increasingly 'operationalized' by technocrats, ideas also become distorted through, for example, excessive or inappropriate quantification. A third is that they are taken over by academic researchers, and become increasingly unsuited to the practical purposes of policy-makers. I shall refer to all these three processes in the following analysis of the 'idea' of human development.

### **The 'human development idea'**

There is no doubt that 'human development' as an idea was very successful, in the sense that it gained a very high profile. To quote Sen:

The idea of human development and the commanding presence of the *Human Development Reports* have become solid parts of the contemporary landscape of social thinking in the international community. (Sen, 2000, p. 17)

And Haq:

The impact of the *Human Development Report* on the global policy dialogue has exceeded expectations. More than 100,000 copies of the report now circulate in 13 languages ... This response is rather unusual for a report from the UN system. (Haq, 1995, p. 43)

In addition to the HDR, nearly 500 *National Human Development Reports* have been produced. In his history of the UNDP, Craig Murphy (2006) notes that on 29 November 2005, the Google search engine found two million pages that mention at least one HDR — an indicator of its extraordinary success.<sup>7</sup> (Of these, 108 000 were on the UNDP site and 82 000 were on the World Bank site). The term ‘human development’ is to be found in publications ranging from academic journals and textbooks to the popular press; as well as the huge volume of written material that emerges from conferences, workshops and the like, associated with development assistance. The importance of the concept is affirmed also by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan who, in an interview under the auspices of the United Nations Intellectual History Project,<sup>8</sup> identified “a number of areas in which he thought the UN shaped discourse ... but pointed to one in particular.” In Kofi Annan’s words: “we have defined what development means for the individual through our *Human Development Reports*. ... So we have given a functional and meaningful definition to poverty and development, which wasn’t there before” (quoted in Weiss and Carayannis, 2005, p. 255).

Why has the idea been so popular? According to Sen: “The idea of human development won because the world was ready for it” (Sen, 2000, p. 21). Although I agree with this statement, and others have said the same about this and other ideas,<sup>9</sup> it offers little by way of explanation, being dependent on the benefit of hindsight. But this may be in part remedied by a more generous, and elaborated, interpretation of the term ‘the world was ready for it’.

What was the state of the world — or, more specifically, the world of development policy — at that time (i.e. the late 1980s)? This was the period of structural adjustment, and human development can rightly be seen as a reaction against these policies, and the ideas on which they were based. It was also a reaction against the predominance of concern for economic growth, and more specifically against the policies of structural adjustment. This is clearly Haq’s view, for in setting the historical scene for human development, he draws a parallel with the Redistribution with Growth (RwG) debate of the early 1970s:

The breakthrough (RwG) was simple, as most truths are: Yes, increased productivity is necessary. But let us ask the question, increased productivity of whom and for whom? ... The productivity of the poor should be increased. With that intellectual breakthrough, national policy-makers focused on recasting their development planning strategies... And in the late

1980s, it was necessary to generate a similar intellectual ferment around the concerns of adjustment and growth with human development. (Haq, 1995, p.8)

Another well-placed commentator, Richard Jolly,<sup>10</sup> notes how the HDRs set out a fundamental alternative to Bretton Woods orthodoxy, and traces the history back to the 1970s, to the debate over basic needs and the work of the International Labour Organisation, which “formed the cutting edge of the UN’s contributions to development thinking about national policy in the 1970s” (Jolly, 2005, p.54). Then came the numerous international conferences — on environment and development, population, women, etc. — which “carried forward development thinking and achieved considerable and substantive consensus at least with respect to national policy” (Jolly, 2005, p. 54). But “in the 1980s, with rising debt and world recession, action on many of these broader perspectives and priorities was brought to a shuddering halt. With strong political and financial support from the industrialized countries, the locus of international economic policy shifted to the Bretton Woods Institutions.” And the development agenda was narrowed: “The UN was left to take on the role of constructive dissent. In 1985, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) began promoting the need for ‘adjustment with a human face’.<sup>11</sup> And the Economic Commission for Africa was mobilizing for alternatives in Africa” (*op. cit.*, p. 55).

In summary, there was in the late 1980s increasing dissatisfaction among many in the development field — both with structural adjustment policies, and the dominance of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). In this sense, ‘the world was ready for it’; an emphasis on human development was precisely what was needed. In brief, its success may be attributed to a combination of academic authority and institutional backing. Academic authority was provided by Sen and others in the small group of advisers that Haq drew upon, and institutional backing came from the UNDP. This organization, which was never strong in relation to the World Bank, had in the 1980s been further losing out in terms of its influence over what might be termed global development policy, and it urgently needed to make its mark in some way. The HDR offered an opportunity.<sup>12</sup> But the UNDP was a cautious organization, and no-one could, at this early stage, envisage how successful the exercise would be. It is no coincidence that the HDR is not an official UNDP statement. As stated clearly in the foreword by William Draper III in 1990 (with minor variations since):<sup>13</sup>

The views expressed in this Report are those of the team and not necessarily shared by UNDP or its Governing Council or the member governments of UNDP. The essence of any such report must be its independence and its intellectual integrity. (UNDP, 1990, p. iii)

According to Haq:

What has made the *Human Development Report* an invaluable addition to the global policy dialogue is its intellectual independence and its professional integrity — its courage more than its analysis. (Haq, 1995, p. 43)

The independence and integrity of its authors has indeed been the strength of the HDR; but international institutions are not very outspoken, and are inevitably slow-moving. Although Draper himself was supportive, the views of UNDP staff and member states were not always positive and supportive of human development. Structural adjustment views were also found in the UNDP in the early 1980s, and Asun Lera St Clair affirms that it took several years until the idea became officially accepted, noting that “according to Richard Jolly this can be dated to the mid 1990s” (St Clair, 2003, p. 216). Moreover, there is little doubt that even now the HDR would be written differently if the authors did not continue to enjoy the independence that Draper, and subsequently other UNDP administrators, gave them.

The combining of academic authority and institutional support is not always easy to achieve: there is resistance on both sides. What was most helpful in this case was the existence of a small network of individuals linking academia and the UN. In *Reflections on Human Development*, Haq lists the following as among those “who have contributed so generously to the ideas in this book: Paul Streeten, Amartya Sen, Frances Stewart, Gustav Ranis, Meghnad Desai, Keith Griffin, Wouter Tims, Jim Grant, Richard Jolly, Hans Singer, Dragoslav Avramovic” (Haq 1995, p. xviii). Sakiko Fukuda-Parr lists, in addition to these, “others, such as Sudhir Anand and Meghnad Desai, who had creative expertise in quantitative methods” (Fukuda-Parr, 2003, p. 302).

Some were more firmly located in academia, others in the UN system; but all were — to varying extents — able and willing to cross the borders. And Haq — in addition to his own personal qualities — was exceptionally well placed. The mutual respect and friendship of the central actors was clearly of great importance. Sen was an undergraduate with Haq at Cambridge, and Ranis knew Haq from his time at Yale.<sup>14</sup>

A crucial reason for the success of the ‘idea’ of human development was that it combined the practical and policy-relevant with the academically respectable. Clearly some, such as Sen, were more concerned with intellectual rigour, while others, and especially Haq himself, were very willing to sacrifice this to some extent to political efficacy. To quote Sen:

Mahbub’s innovation was, in an important sense, a philosophical departure. I say this with hesitation, since Mahbub was always very skeptical of philosophy. (Sen, 2000, p. 18)

Mahbub’s impatience with theory, which (I have to confess) I sometimes found quite frustrating, was a great help in this

[building agreement] ... *Mabbub transformed the inquiry into an intensely practical one.* (*op. cit.* p. 21; emphasis added)

It is not easy to bridge the gap between academia and practical policy-making, but academic authority certainly helps. The secure intellectual grounding of human development was largely based on the work of Sen.<sup>15</sup> But, as noted in Bøås and McNeill (2004), policy is about politics — and ideas may be resisted for political reasons, reflecting the interests of powerful actors. It may indeed be the case that 'the world was ready for the idea of human development' when it emerged in 1990; but did it then become distorted?

### **Risks of distortion**

Potentially potent ideas can be damaged in various ways. It is therefore instructive to examine how human development fared with respect to the three threats we identified above in the CANDID project: that it may become blurred and blunted, be distorted through excessive or inappropriate quantification, or be taken over by academic researchers and become increasingly unsuited for practical purposes. I shall consider each in turn.

There is a tendency for people to modify a new term, and to stretch it to an extent that can damage its integrity. Thus the term 'informal' was extended beyond employment to 'informal housing', 'informal finance', and so on; and the term 'sustainable' has become grossly over-used. As I have argued elsewhere, the fact that a new term is flexible and its constituency diverse has considerable advantages in terms of its gaining wide acceptance; but this may be achieved at the cost of the clarity and focus of its content. 'Social capital' can mean all things to all people (McNeill, 2004). By contrast, the concept human development, being more explicitly opposed to another — arguably the dominant — perspective, is less susceptible to distortion. And the specific words matter. The fact that the word 'human' cannot be regarded as a neologism is an asset in this context. Simply adding the word 'sustainable' to a text sometimes gives the appearance that concern for the environment is taken care of; but the effect is rather different in the case of the word 'human'.

It is important, I suggest, that human development did not merely add to, but explicitly opposed, the dominant neo-liberal paradigm. In this respect it differs from other ideas I have studied that have tended to be less confrontational. The idea of 'sustainable development', for example, sought to extend and supplement — rather than directly confront — the established wisdom; as did the idea of 'social capital'. This contrasts with the case of the informal sector, and of women in development/gender and development. In each of these examples, the more radical interpretation represented quite a fundamental challenge; but it was the reformist version that generally prevailed. This, I suggest, was an important factor

helping to explain not only why the idea of 'human development' was taken up, but also why it was less susceptible to distortion.

Although the term 'human development' has been adopted by innumerable writers and institutions, the UNDP has to some extent managed to maintain its hold on the concept by continuing to produce the HDRs annually since 1990. New topics have been introduced: security, gender, consumption, human rights, technologies, and so forth; and the global reports have been translated into more and more languages.<sup>16</sup> The number of people involved in the production of the HDR is now very large, involving not only numerous consultants that prepare background papers, but also innumerable commentators. The pursuit of media attention can, however, create a problem; namely the need to be innovative every single year, and to have something new to present at the press conferences around the world. There are, I suggest, decreasing returns to effort; and forced innovation may even begin to detract from, rather than add to, the merit of the concept. One might counter this by arguing that the novelty lies mainly in applying the idea to different issues (technology, consumption, etc.).

The question then arises what theme is chosen. Topics come and go in the development field — and in the attempt to latch on to a passing bandwagon, a concept may suffer painful damage. I perceive the recent emphasis on 'human security' as a possible example. But, according to Fukuda-Parr, one may detect longer term trends in the development of human development in the global reports. The human development approach, she says, has "evolved in directions that pay more attention to the agency aspects of human development — to political freedoms and institutions as well as political processes" (Fukuda-Parr, 2003, p. 315).

It is widely claimed in UNDP that the World Bank distorted the idea (whether intentionally or otherwise) by interpreting it as almost synonymous with education and health — thus reducing both its political and analytical 'edge'. In such circumstances it is difficult to assess how far the idea has been successful in changing actual policies. As Sen notes:

One can detect some accommodating gestures coming out of the citadels of economic growth — the World Bank and the IMF — though how far this conversion to human development is real rather than rhetorical has yet to be seen. (Sen, 1989, p. 44)<sup>17</sup>

There can be little doubt about the increasing convergence, at least since the early 1990s, in the rhetoric of the UNDP and the World Bank, but it is more difficult to be so definite about their policies and practice. The danger remains, therefore, that the idea of human development can lose its cutting edge, and be de-politicized. However, two interesting examples may be cited to exemplify how the idea can retain its critical power.

One is that the 'global' reports have, in recent years, been supplemented by a number of regional and national reports, such as the *Regional Human Development Reports for Asia and the Pacific* (UNDP/

Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, 2005, 2006),<sup>18</sup> and, perhaps more significantly, given the controversy they stimulated, a series of *Regional Human Development Reports* on the Arab States, highlighting 'three deficits': freedom, capabilities/knowledge and women's empowerment (UNDP/Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, 2002, 2003, 2004). The latter reports, written by well-respected, independent individuals, mainly from the region, have stimulated considerable interest. But even those who object to their content find it hard to reject the data and analyses in the reports; these have thus achieved considerable influence, drawing, in part, on the authority of the concept of human development.

Another example is the publication *Making Global Trade Work for People* (UNDP, 2003). This too has been both controversial and influential, although for rather different reasons. The product of a lengthy process involving a large number of experts from all over the world, its aim is "to provide policy-makers, practitioners, civil society groups and others engaged in trade issues with some concrete ideas on how to move forward" (UNDP, 2003, p. xii). What is interesting for the purposes of this paper is how the book takes the concept of human development as its starting point and guiding light. The idea of human development has, in this instance, certainly provided inspiration; and also, perhaps, legitimacy and authority.

In summary, human development has, by comparison with other comparable 'ideas', been relatively successful in resisting being 'blurred and blunted'. But, what about the threat of excessive or inappropriate quantification? This is where the related concept of the HDI plays a crucial role. It was certainly not by chance that Haq promoted the HDI; he was well aware of the value of using such an index (Fukuda-Parr, 2003, p. 305). It is important to appreciate the part that it played in putting the concept of human development on the map. Sen (together with Anand) played a central role in the development of the HDI, despite his reservations about it. According to him, the HDI "was devised explicitly as a rival to GNP", but, "not surprisingly, it has a boorishness that is somewhat similar to that of the GNP" (Sen, 2006, p. 257).

The HDI has certainly proved a major focus of interest. Haq himself anticipated this, being well aware of the importance of media in the battle for ideas. He identified it as a strength that the index (and the concept) are open to improvements.<sup>19</sup> Variants on the HDI have been developed, relating to more specific themes, such as the Gender-related Development Index and the Gender Empowerment Measure.<sup>20</sup> Some modifications have been made to the HDI (e.g. in the 1999 HDR), though some issues have, been too "hot", as Streeten relates:

You have to be careful not to say things that are violating some peoples' interests. Take, for example, the freedom debate in the Human Development Reports, and whether to include it in the index or have a separate index. On purely intellectual grounds, it was probably the right thing not to incorporate freedom in the

HDI. But to have a separate freedom index would have been very interesting. Yet even Mahbub did not get away with it. We had to drop it. (Streeten, 2001, p. 127)

There have been, and will no doubt continue to be, lively debates as to how the HDI can be improved, or why it should be abandoned. My own view is that its huge merit is its effectiveness. It is necessarily a compromise between a single measure and a multiple measure. This places it in an extremely vulnerable position — to be attacked from two opposite sides (defenders of the Gross National Product (GNP) and almost everyone else), as well as on the flank (from experts in the construction of composite indices). Yet it has served, and continues to serve, its purpose: to stake out a credible alternative to GNP that nevertheless could survive in ‘the rugged world of measurement’. In Sen’s own words:

The usefulness of the HDI is dependent on understanding its purpose and limits. It is aimed at broadening the informational narrowness of the GNP or GDP [Gross Domestic Product]. This it does, but it cannot capture the breadth of the human development approach in general. No one number can, no matter how much we try to pack into that number. (Sen, 2006, p. 260)

As Fukuda-Parr rightly states: the “HDI remains a measure of average achievement and its strength lies in its simplicity” (Fukuda-Parr, 2003, p. 306). She stresses that human development is a broader concept, but “unfortunately, the human development approach has often been misconstrued as being narrowly limited to the three capabilities included in the HDI ... The human development concept has been trapped inside its reduced measure” (*op. cit.*, 2003, p. 307).

Sen’s own explanation for the success of human development is that it was a reaction against a narrow utilitarianism. “In the intellectual victory that utilitarian accounting achieved in mainstream moral philosophy, quite a bit of the work was done, often implicitly, by the trumped-up belief that it would be somehow analytically mistaken, or at least ferociously clumsy, to have many different things as being simultaneously valuable” (Sen, 2000, p. 17). In his book *Development as Freedom*, Sen refers only briefly to human development. In modern times, he says, these ideas can be traced from the famous economist A.C. Pigou (Sen, 1999, p. 73). According to Sen, utilitarianism and the mono-concentration on one variable, utility:

not only suppressed the claims of rival theories, it also corrupted and deformed the intellectual basis of the claims underlying these theories by making their advocates opt for a subsidiary route to influence via their effects on utilities. The utilitarian emperor offered small native kingdoms, under strict viceregal supervision, to advocates of freedom, rights, equal treatment and many other putative claimants to ethical authority. (Sen, 1999, p. 20)

And deriving strength from this philosophical position was the concept of the GNP:

Riding initially as a kind of younger brother of utility, the concept of real income has managed to get a very special status in applied work in development economics. ... In the rugged world of measurement, the concentration shifted from the foundational concern with utilities ... to a practical involvement with income statistics and evaluations based on this ... The devotees of what is called 'an operational metric' declared victory over all pluralist rivals ... It was not so easy to defeat the dominance of utility and, in practice, of the GNP or other related income-based measures. (Sen, 1999, p. 20)

Here again, therefore, we find the concept deriving strength from being not merely additional to, but in some sense challenging, the dominant paradigm (Jolly, 2003). Although I fully agree with Sen's analysis, I believe it needs to be complemented by a political perspective. Why has the utilitarian approach been so dominant? Why has it not been more effectively resisted? Here it is necessary to look behind the power of the World Bank and the IMF, and examine the power of the economist and the technocrat in development research and policy.<sup>21</sup> To use Sen's words, I suggest that the economist is the 'viceregal supervisor', and the technocrat the 'devotee of an operational metric'. To remedy this situation it is necessary to make space for other disciplines in the making of development policy. All the main characters behind the human development, however, are also economists. Although they were indeed challenging the dominant position of the 'Washington consensus', they were nevertheless doing so from within the economics discipline. Similar, if not more radical, criticisms from other disciplines have largely gone unheard, as noted by Raymond Apthorpe (1997), and by Des Gasper (2002). The latter asks: "Are the HDRs really 'Human' — or still too economic?" (Gasper, 2002, p. 445).

The third threat I identified was that ideas may be taken over by academic researchers, leading to excessive complexity: both with regard to the idea (human development) and the index (HDI). It is not difficult to find fault with the idea of human development, and researchers from a variety of disciplines have done so. Many of these researchers are, however, supportive — certainly of the aim of the enterprise, and, broadly, with the concept. Yet support from academics can be dangerous. A key virtue of the idea is its simplicity. To sacrifice this is to risk much, as both Haq and Sen were aware, in relation to the HDI:

It is best to recognize that the HDI will remain a partial reflection of reality. And there is some virtue in keeping the index sharp and simple, studying other legitimate concerns alongside the HDI rather than trying to integrate everything into the HDI. (Haq, 1995, p. 58)

The HDI is based on a heroic selection and puts the focus on some of these features, while totally neglecting others. The problem cannot be rectified by including more factors into this one numerical index ... (Sen, 2006, p. 7)

The danger of excessive complexity may also apply, I suggest, to the idea of human development itself, when academics are involved. Complexity is what academics enjoy, and what is rewarded; but this is not what policy-makers need. As the Nobel prize-winning economist Robert Solow put it, in his insightful article 'How Economic Ideas Turn to Mush':

Academic researchers devote nearly all of their time to refining basic ideas, touching up the picture here and there, generalizing in minor ways, and neatening proofs. That is how we get our kicks, and our promotions. If all that filigree work gets elided as the proposition works its way down to extra-academic discussion, maybe nothing of any significance is lost. (Solow, 1993, p. 77)

Following Sen, a number of researchers in philosophy have been attracted to explore the concept of human development. But there are, I suggest, dangers in philosophers becoming closely involved in policy-making. Economists have long enjoyed an unduly privileged position with regard to development policy-makers, and it is, I believe, positive that other disciplines should challenge this dominance, and bring other perspectives and values to bear. But it is important that the close involvement of philosophers does not lead to unduly complex analysis, or unsubstantiated prescription. It is the simplicity and clarity of the concept of human development that is its strength; and it would be unfortunate if the positive contribution to the debate that philosophers can make were to be negated by their undermining this core virtue.

## **Conclusion**

'Human development' compares rather favourably with some of the other ideas I have studied, with regard to the three threats I identified at the outset. The first of these threats is that concepts may be blurred and blunted largely because of a desire to achieve consensus, and to attract a larger constituency of support. Human development is indeed a very broad term, but it emerged in explicit opposition to another paradigm, exemplified by the World Bank. This gave it both a large constituency and a clarity that other concepts to varying extents lack.

The second threat is that concepts are distorted through excessive or inappropriate quantification. Here the HDI was quite an effective pre-emptive mechanism. At the same time as the concept was developed, so too was the method of quantification. The authors themselves have therefore, to a large extent, exerted control over this process.

The third threat is that concepts are taken over by academic researchers, who introduce a degree of complexity that distances the concept from the practical world of policy-making. Although I see this as perhaps the most serious of the three threats, it is not yet so great as to destroy the power of the idea.

In conclusion, the term human development has proved most valuable. When once accepted by the UNDP, it has provided technical, political and even moral guidance. It has even acted as a source of institutional identity for UNDP staff. Although I have suggested that there may be a danger of philosophers damaging the idea by making it unduly complex, and thereby limiting its usefulness for policy purposes, I welcome the increased interest and involvement of philosophers in development research and policy. But I would emphasize the merit of simplicity. Perhaps the most important contribution philosophers can make is to reintroduce an ethical perspective to the debate. To quote Haq once again.

There is a missing moral core in our technological advance. In rich nations and poor, the moral foundations of economic growth are often lacking. And we are too embarrassed even to mention morality any more. (Haq, 1995, p. 202)

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### **Notes**

- 1 A draft of this paper was presented in Paris at the Human Development–Capability Association (HD-CA) conference 2005.
- 2 The quote is from a paper written by J. Schumpeter in 1932, but only recently translated into English. The term he is referring to here is not human development, but 'evolutionism'.
- 3 He was trained at Lahore, Pakistan, at Cambridge, England, and at Yale, USA. He was Chief Economist of Pakistan Planning Commission (1957–1970), was Director of World Bank Policy Planning Department (1970–1982), was Planning and Finance Minister of Pakistan (1970–1982), before his appointment as Special Adviser to UNDP Administrator.
- 4 The first (written) explicit mention of 'human development' in this process was apparently in 1986, in a publication co-edited by ul Haq's wife, Khadija (Haq and

- Kirdar, 1986) based on the Islamabad North South Roundtable in September 1985 (St Clair, 2004).
- 5 According to Mahbub ul Haq's account of the HDI: "Those who made significant contributions at an initial stage to the evolution of the HDI include Amartya Sen, and Meghnad Desai, later joined by Gustav Ranis, Frances Stewart, Paul Streeten, Inge Kaul and Sudhir Anand" (Haq, 1995, p. 61).
  - 6 "The academic reaches agreement by clarifying his meaning, by heightening distinctions, so that he knows what the difference is about. It is partly the lack of clarity, the lack of sharpness, that the UN documents suffer from that has the virtue that they can lead to action" (Streeten, 2001).
  - 7 He notes that this is "about as many pages as when you search for the Beatles — *Variety* magazine's 'icons of the century' (Murphy, 2006). In his account of human development, Murphy emphasizes the important role that the then Administrator William Draper played in promoting the idea.
  - 8 Co-directors Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss. [See <http://www.unhistory.org/>]
  - 9 In an interview under the auspices of the UN Intellectual History Project, Dharam Ghai, former director of UNRISD, gives a slightly more elaborated argument along the same lines (about ideas in general, not 'human development' specifically): "The idea has to have some power. It must be relevant. And it should fit the time ... A lot of the time these things are in the air ... A concept emerges which captures this ... Then it spreads very rapidly" (Weiss and Carayannis, 2005, p. 252)
  - 10 Richard Jolly was Principal Coordinator of HDR for several years from 1996, and played a key role in earlier very relevant activities: in the RwG debate (while at IDS Sussex), and at UNICEF.
  - 11 The book *Adjustment with a Human Face*, edited by G. Cornia, R. Jolly, and F. Stewart, was published in 1987 (Cornia *et al.*, 1987), although the ideas were promoted by UNICEF from 1985.
  - 12 For a review of the role of ideas in the UNDP, see Asun Lera St Clair, who describes how the organization moved "from endorsing an economic view of poverty and development to increasingly include an ethically formulated perspective" (St Clair, 2004, p. 178).
  - 13 For example, in 2004: "Like all *Human Development Reports* this is an independent study ... not a statement of United Nations or UNDP policy. *However*, by taking up an issue often neglected by development economists ... it presents important arguments for UNDP and its partners ..." (UNDP, 2004 p.vi; emphasis added).
  - 14 Personal communication, 19 September 2005.
  - 15 Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, who also emphasizes the role that Sen played, notes that: "It is unclear why the term 'choices' replaced 'capabilities' in the HDRs" (Fukuda-Parr, 2003, p. 315) This is an interesting point that I do not have the space to elaborate here. Fukuda-Parr took over from Richard Jolly at the UNDP. She had earlier headed the UNDP Team, a position she took over from Inge Kaul, who had been there since the first HDR in 1990.
  - 16 According to information received from the UNDP Human Development Report Office (October 2006), the English-language 2006 global HDR will be translated into Arabic, Catalan, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish.
  - 17 It may be relevant to record that Sen wrote *Development as Freedom* at the invitation of the World Bank.
  - 18 The Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre (Pakistan) has also produced a series of South Asia Human Development Reports since 1997. [See <http://www.undp.org/in/hdrc/>]
  - 19 "One of the most important decisions was to keep the coverage and methodology of HDI quite flexible — subject to gradual refinements as analytical critiques emerged and better data became available" (Haq, 1995, p.48).
  - 20 See *Journal of Human Development* (2006), volume 7(2) — 'Special Issue: Revisiting the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)'.

21 For further elaboration of the 'economic-technocratic nexus', see Bøås and McNeill (2004).

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