

# The United Nations Development Programme: A better way?

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**ABSTRACT** *Gillian Youngs discusses some of the broad themes featured in The United Nations Development Programme : A Better Way? by Craig Murphy. She looks at the central role of the concept of human development in the progress of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the pivotal contribution of the annual Human Development Report published by the UNDP from 1990 onwards.*

**KEYWORDS** *Human Development Report; SDP; networking; poverty; inequalities*

The Human Development Reports through their statistical data and analysis, as well as focus on individual themes year by year, have provided a continually growing understanding of the multiple dimensions of human development, including inequalities related to gender. The move to bottom up perspectives on development has been aided by attention to women's diverse roles in the development process. This has been one of the most significant shifts in discourses and practices of development.

The *Human Development Report* has told the negative side of the globalization story: deepening inequality gaps across the world. In this regard it has been a vital advocacy tool. But it is as yet unclear whether there will be sufficient political will to overcome these problems, especially in the context of the security steer on development related to 'war on terror' priorities.

... the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile (cited Murphy, 2006: 243).

If words help to capture some of the inadequacies of the reductive picture painted by mainstream economic indicators like gross national product (GNP), then these count. They help us to understand the aims and possibilities as well as the wider social and ethical context for the work of UNDP. In Craig Murphy's impressively detailed history of the organization, such interjections are a potent reminder that development is a highly contested, problematic and political concept, both in discursive and practical (policy) terms.

The quote is from US presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy shortly before his assassination in 1968. They tell us that crude economic framings of success such as GNP hide as much as they reveal, mystify as much as they enlighten. And if these are the main

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ways of depicting economic achievement and wealth, then it is a particular interpretation, and one that separates much that is human from the concept of development rather than working to bind the two together. This theme of separation will be core to the themes covered in this review essay, which considers diverse efforts of the UNDP to counter it.

Kennedy also stated:

Too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product ... if we should judge America by that – counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for those who break them. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and the cost of a nuclear warhead, and armored cars for police who fight riots in our streets (p. 243).

Kennedy remind us that statistics are much more than numbers. They paint pictures of the world, so what they count makes a powerful political and symbolic difference to our sense of what is meaningful or important in that world. Their exclusions are powerful too, and work to write out of political and economic framings of the world much more than they include. This might not matter so much if categories such as GNP were not so dominant in summing up development or lack of it, but they have been and continue to be. And, as such, they contribute to defining development very much as 'the mere accumulation of material things' when we all know that development is and should be so much more than this.

UNDP's efforts towards 'a better way' of doing and thinking about development is the major orientation of Murphy's analysis, which emphasizes the leading role that UNDP has taken in both 'strategic' and 'normative' approaches to development: work towards the combined aims of 'eradicating poverty and fostering substantive democracy' (pp. 2–3). For Murphy the UNDP's 'history can help us to make sense of the entire international development enterprise'

a history relevant to all of us simply because development cooperation is our primary way of dealing with one of humanity's greatest problems, our seemingly intractable division into two interdependent and potentially hostile worlds, one of wealth and one of poverty (p. 4).

For these reasons, Murphy's history makes timely reading. In the new 'war on terror' era, focus has shifted dramatically towards questions of security, conflict and competition in global politics. Geopolitical concerns are currently dominated by questions of war and territory, hegemonic pressures and the violence linked to them including through diverse forms of resistance. With war as both the reality and dominating discourse of international relations, enduring questions of the structural violence of global inequalities and the daily deaths and suffering resulting from them get pushed even further into the background than usual. And this is especially worrying with the timeless and boundless characteristics of the 'war on terror' framing. While it has characteristics of warfare, it is not a war in conventional senses, something that takes place in a particular location and over a specific timeframe. Rather, it is something depicted as all encompassing and seemingly endless, a permanent state of threat and danger.

This politics has many implications for the development agenda, perhaps the most important being the overall risk of pushing it further and further from mainstream attention. Many of us would argue that the devastation of contemporary global inequalities matches or even transcends the threats of the 'war on terror', not least because they are based on long-established patterns of production and consumption dividing the most and least developed parts of the world into obscenely extreme categories of haves and havenots. But the challenge of keeping such concerns to the fore in the dramatically securitized times we live in is likely to increasingly preoccupy those in the development community in the years, and possibly decades to come.

'Development' can be understood as the complex of social practices designed to ameliorate the post-Industrial Revolution problem of inequality across

societies in a sustainable manner. Modern industry has linked together a global community with large areas of wealth and poverty unlike anything that existed from one agricultural empire to the next (p. 29).

In such summations, Murphy succinctly reminds us of the relationship between global interdependencies and uneven development and the differentiated life opportunities of individuals related to the system of industrial and post-industrial capitalism.

Because we live in a world where income translates into power, into the ability to control one's own life, growing income inequality is a sign of growth in a deeper inequality in the freedoms that different groups of people enjoy. This is the problem development solves: 'development' is the set of practices that increase the capacity of people to control their own lives (p. 30).

Murphy's history of the UNDP is a powerful reminder of the institutionalized recognition of the importance of the development challenge for a more peaceful as well as more equitable world. He explains that the UNDP's foundation in 1966 developed out of two forerunner organizations – the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance and the United Nations Special Fund – and today the Programme has offices in more than 150 countries, with most playing a coordinating role for the whole UN family of organizations, and in some countries coordinating and promoting all external assistance (pp. 5–6).

Murphy maps three approaches to development as essential to understanding the history of the UNDP – 'development as growth', 'development as freedom' and 'development as efficiency' (p. 42). While the growth and efficiency emphases represent the familiar economic story, the freedom emphasis 'goes more directly to the heart of the problem of unequal power' (p. 44).

If development is what the people want it to be, its characteristic means will be techniques for reaching joint agreements on long-term goals and the collective action needed to achieve them – 'democracy' or 'democratic social planning' (p. 44).

From such a standpoint development goes well beyond the economic and material to the wider

social and political framework, the settings and processes for organizing and decision-making, participation and reflection.

The bottom-up and grounded aspects of 'development as freedom' are perhaps the most noteworthy, for in this regard

capacity building involves a combination of local knowledge with acquired knowledge, people taking concepts, theories, procedures, and skills from abroad and remaking them as their own, remaking them as something contextualized and embedded within their own lives (p. 45).

This is clearly the more idealized dimension of the development endeavour, the one that prioritizes the local as much as the global, the interaction of the two to produce home-grown orientations rather than those fashioned from outside. It must too often be much more a story of the hopes and aspirations of those involved in development than its actualities.

As Murphy explains, the 'development as freedom' pole depicts a sense of development as a mutual or collaborative path with inputs reflecting on the ground desires. It is

not equivalent to accepting all the views of your partners. Rather, donors taking this approach, which is compatible with the kind of advocacy that the UNDP has pursued since the 1980s, simply believe that recipients should define their own goals and are capable of making good decisions (p. 46).

The 'development as freedom' perspective is at least in part about learning how the market can work for you to enhance your possibilities and potential as a collective or at the individual level. It is about working with and through the market. It 'embraces markets as a way to expand human opportunities, especially choices for work and education' (47).

The 'development as freedom' era was not to fully arrive for the UNDP until the 1990s following more constrained times.

The North–South conflict, which became acute in the early 1970s, undermined the assumptions on which the UNDP's high expectations in the late 1960s rested. Instead of robust growth, the international development business – especially UNDP – faced financial stagnation. Instead of a global

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consensus on the means and ends of development, ideological fragmentation and adherence to rigid positions became the norm (p. 139).

The US priorities shifted to more strategic bilateral rather than multilateral orientations.

Support of multilateral aid programmes over which the United States had limited influence became somewhat superfluous, a matter perhaps, of good public relations, but something that could be given up if funds were needed elsewhere (p. 158).

Murphy examines how in the 1980s the move towards the emphasis on individual development rights and 'the need for a democratic, capable and autonomous state to assure them' was linked to the Women in Development movement and the embedding of UNIFEM within UNDP, the focus of the Latin American Bureau on democratization (that anticipated an overall shift in this direction of the Programme as a whole), and efforts to help build alternative development strategies in Africa to 'more effectively protect vulnerable persons' (p. 199). These provided the basis for Sustainable Human Development and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that would come to guide UNDP's work. The chapter where Murphy discusses these developments defines them in terms of UNDP as a 'learning organization'. The recognition of women's role as a fundamental to the development process is worth highlighting in this context. The UN declared 1975 as 'International Women's Year' with the UN Women's Conference in Mexico City as its central event, declaring a 'UN Decade for Women', with the beginning of funding efforts that would lead to the establishment of UNIFEM (pp. 202–203).

In UNIFEM's first years, the accepted understanding of the role of women in development began to shift. At the Mexico City conference, the emphasis had been more on development's impact on women than on women's impact on development. Yet Ester Boserup had been at pains to demonstrate that in terms of any coherent, empirical understanding of 'development', women were at its centre, not only doing most of the reproductive labour of society, but also accounting for the majority of time worked in all sectors (p. 203).

It is interesting to think about the extent to which bottom-up approaches to development have

been influenced by attention to the complex roles of women in society. We might argue that the continually growing inclusion of women in perspectives and policies on development has been one of the most significant points of transformation of the whole development process. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been as solidly involved in such transformation as UN and other relevant organizations. And the UNDP's key innovation, the annual *Human Development Report*, and its specific contributions to gender-disaggregated statistics and analysis has been part of this process since the 1990s.

It is rare that questions related to women are considered in relation to major institutional change. But this is one of the useful contributions of this history of the UNDP and the way in which Murphy presents it. The discussion illuminates the extent to which issues related to women have become increasingly central to the global development agenda, not only contributing to changes in understandings of the development process writ large, but also being instrumental in institutional progress in major organizations such as the UNDP. All too often, scant attention is paid to macro shifts that result either from the direct action of women or from the recognition of their influence and importance, socially, politically, economically and culturally.

The UNDP story offers a chance to counteract this and Murphy's thoughtful analysis includes sufficient focus on the issue to encourage further thought about it. Women are so often written out of history by being ignored, excluded or given limited or distorted attention. The absences lead of course to assumptions that women were not relevant, influential or of note. While such assumptions can be contested, the huge weight of the absences still has effect. Inequalities impacting on women and women's rights as human rights have gained growing attention since the latter part of the 20th century and the UNDP's work has been intrinsic to this process.

Murphy admits that at the end of the 1980s, it was easy to think the UNDP's 'glory days were over' but the introduction of the *Human Development Report* was an innovation that ensured it would continue to have 'a unique role to play'

(pp. 232–233). In 1990, the Governing Council steered focus predominantly to human development – poverty eradication including grassroots participation, environment, management development, technical cooperation among developing countries, technology transfer, and women (p. 240). The concept of human development as articulated and enlarged on in the UNDP's annual *Human Development Report* can be argued as one of the most dramatic and constantly expanding transformations in development discourse.

I speak as someone whose research agenda on globalization and inequality has been substantially influenced not only by the human development concept itself, but also by the ways in which it has evolved in the *Human Development Report*, including through statistical measures such as the GDI (gender development index) and GEM (gender empowerment measure). The overarching HDI (human development index) has done much to go beyond the crude reductionistic and economic measures of economic success. The HDI offers subtle enough links and contrasts with traditional economic measures to make it worthy of the widest attention, and together with other indicators in the reports has painted a picture of human development in detail that builds year on year, including through different themes.

The *Human Development Report* arrived at a crucial time when runaway globalization was embedding deepening inequality gaps, both between North and South and within societies across the world. The *Human Development Report* has played a distinctive part in making the complexity of these inequalities evident, and I would go as far as to say that without the *Human Development Report* they may have been significantly hidden from view. This could not be more important bearing in mind that gross inequality is one of the most daunting and devastating global issues of our times. The *Human Development Report* has positioned the UNDP as a key instigator and catalyst of knowledge generation related to human development.

... the very independence of the report – which ensured that every report would disturb at least some UN member governments – was part of a causal chain that led many NGOs and political parties in

the developing world ... to embrace the human development framework and suggest further ways in which it could be refined. This helped to turn the UNDP from being an organization that increased the dependence of people on their governments to one that also helped to keep governments accountable to their citizens (p. 242).

The bottom-up relevance of the *Human Development Report* is part of its power as advocacy. It gives it a wide and inclusive potential audience, and makes it highly suited to the contemporary multi-stakeholder orientation and the diverse users associated with it. Murphy also stresses the practical impact of the *Human Development Report*.

It has had an almost immediate impact on the allocation of development funds, especially donor funds, shifting them towards the priority concerns of poverty reduction and social welfare (p. 245).

The wider policy influence of the emphasis on human development is illustrated by Murphy pointing out that in late 2005 there were almost as many Internet pages about human development on the World Bank's site as there were on the UNDP's (p. 246).

Yet the two organizations together account for less than 3 percent of the 2,000,000 pages that mention at least one Human Development Report ... And if you try to find all the references to the concept alone, you get about as many pages as when you search for the Beatles ... (p. 246).

The reports came from small beginnings with the first one in 1990 being written out by hand by Mahbub ul Haq in a small supply room at UNDP and with the input of a small group of core consultants (pp. 246–247). By the 2005 report, the first under Kevin Watkins, no fewer than 250 people were acknowledged to have had major involvement (p. 247). The annual themes for the reports have ensured a continually growing global knowledge network around them. 'Each of the new dimensions explored have, in turn, helped to maintain the vitality of the larger human development research programme and of the concept itself' (p. 247). But the politics surrounding human development and how they have

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impacted on the UNDP are equally interesting and complex.

By half-way through the current decade there was speculation whether the UNDP had become the victim of its own success with the spread of the adoption of the concept and strategies of human development, or whether applications of the concept beyond the UNDP, for example in the World Bank, were proving more attractive to some donors.

Some critics are even less charitable. They see not only a simplifying through-disaggregation of ul Haq's central concept in other organizations, but also a de-radicalization of the policy analysis that other agencies apply to each of the separate elements. For the Bank and for some bilateral organizations, 'poverty alleviation' is still often reduced to 'growth', 'crises of human security' become opportunities to restructure societies to reinforce the global status quo, and 'good governance' becomes little more than 'protecting private property' (p. 300).

Obviously, the discourse of human development is as open as any other to manipulation for more or less positive and diverse strategic reasons, in major as much as minor institutional settings. In this sense, it is no more neutral than any other concept in development or elsewhere. And because money is frequently at stake, motivations may not always be pure. But as Murphy points out, there is also the straightforward fact that in the 1990s the UNDP's biggest problem was that only a portion of foreign aid was going to the things it considered important (p. 301). The recent picture for UNDP seems positive according to Murphy. By the middle of this decade, donors were coming back and UNDP funding was growing faster than the overall aid that increased in the years following 9/11 (p. 307). In 2004 about 90 per cent of UNDP's partners agreed that the Programme's projects reflected national priorities, and in a 2005 British study UNDP came out top among other UN agencies and multilateral development banks on measures of capacity, notably identifying and learning from results (p. 307).

For the future, Murphy advocates

using the example of UNDP's relative openness to encourage other parts of the UN system to pursue

greater transparency and two-way involvement with knowledge makers (scholars, journalists and reflective activists) and with civil society at all levels (p. 352).

It is clear that UNDP's history has contributed as much to maintaining dynamic and challenging focus on the diverse problems of development as well as to enhancing awareness and understanding of them and tackling them directly. And while we may be no nearer to solving these problems on a grand scale, Murphy points out that 'we are closer to agreeing on what development really is' (p. 353). Also, 'most people and their governments believe that it is desirable to feel material responsibilities towards countries where people are not as fortunate' (p. 353).

At the end of Murphy's book, I was not left feeling particularly hopeful about the prospects for development, at least not in the short or medium term. I appreciated his balanced tone throughout in this regard, as his words shed light on both the development debate itself and the particular roles of the UNDP in the conceptualization and practice of development through its history. My discussion of the book has been partial in its focus. I have chosen to concentrate on the broad themes rather than the range of other institutional and case material that are also part of the richness of this work. I have covered the aspects of it that I think would appeal to its widest audience, but it is clear to me that this is a book with many audiences, both insiders and outsiders.

Murphy's assessment of the organization's history includes reference to its leading figures and its different stages. I may be wrong but I sense that this coverage will be of most interest to insiders, people who have either worked in the UNDP or been directly associated with it in different ways. In having some knowledge of the human side of the organization, and the range of personnel involved, and undoubtedly the varied politics and personalities, they will be able to get the most out of this material. It meant much less to me as an outsider, while I still found it accessible and interesting in places.

One of the strengths of this book is that it works on a number of levels at one and the same time and caters to different audiences with ease. This

is a major achievement in my view and one I would like to applaud. The wider discussion about the history of development and human development related to the UNDP is invaluable for practitioners, researchers and students, and the institutional focus offers a distinctive context for the points covered. Outsiders (and some insiders possibly) might want to see more critique of the UNDP and the whole development process itself, the limitations and shortcomings. I could sympathize with that desire especially with regard to the deepening inequalities of the current period and those whose development is failing.

But we should not ask too much of one volume, and as I have stressed, this one already undertakes multiple tasks. It does so in generally accessible and clear language, catering to a broad audience. It tells us a great deal about development over the last half-century, different key players and their influence, shifts in debate and policy focus. Through the lens of the UNDP, we see a world where perspectives on what development is have grown in complexity, and are now established as being about much more than GNP and other traditional economic indicators of success.

The UNDP's annual *Human Development Report* has been a pivotal resource in enhancing the

understanding about the larger human picture of development. These reports have measured inequalities and highlighted that while the biggest gaps exist between the richest in the North and the poorest in the South, the problem of growing inequality is pervasive in societies around the world. The reports have done more than any other single resource to highlight the shared problem of inequality as a global issue, and to provide updated statistics on different facets of inequality, including in relation to gender.

Without such vital analysis and documentation year by year, the challenges of development would be much less well understood. But the existence of such information is not a guarantee that all the necessary action will follow. This is a matter of political will as much as economic possibility. It is a matter of competing priorities. The 'war on terror' has pushed security up the agenda and linked development issues to it, prioritizing some on strategic grounds while neglecting others. It is not easy to predict just how much this will distort the development picture in the years ahead. This volume reminds us that there is a complex history of commitment to the cause of development involving individuals and institutions, and that much has changed over time, but that there is still much to be championed.

## Reference

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