

choices have to be protected” affirmed the first Human Development Report, published in 1990. So, the fact that its 2020 edition puts trees and people together is an important signal from the human development community that should trigger a response from the climate community. After the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, it is yet another opportunity for the climate and human development community to come even closer together and jointly push concrete transformative agendas at the heart of international discussions. What could some of these agendas be?

Overcome inequalities in empowerment and open up spaces for debate and people-led solutions

The major contribution of the human development approach is its focus on increasing people's capabilities, hence enlarging their freedom and choices. The idea behind this is that people become agents of their own sustainable development pathways, steering sustainable innovations in accordance with their goals and values. This concern for agency and stewardship calls for opening up spaces for participation, public debate and empowerment. It questions the efficiency of quick solutions and prefers innovations that are fueled by deliberative shared decision-making and adaptive collective learning processes. It will be important to question the leaders present at the Biden Summit on their willingness to open up such public debates on alternative development pathways within their countries.

The human development can add an inequality lens to the climate discussions. This starts with addressing inequalities in access to power and decision-making about development pathways. Opposition to change is sustained by inequalities in decision-making and by vested interests having the power to frame available information. The HDR argues that inequalities in empowerment today are at the root of environmental problems. The Biden administration is very much aware of the politics of representation and is well placed to address the power game. It should be as offensive in pushing a transformational agenda as the Trump administration was in opposing it. This needs courage to accept losses for those who disproportionately benefit from the status quo.

The report also points out how incentives and regulation need to evolve in order to rewire incentives. First, it lists the incentives within “financial firms as well as the regulatory authorities that oversee them”. Second, it addresses prices, which if not reflecting the true social and environmental costs distort behaviour. Third, it calls for setting incentives for collective action, including at the international level. The human development and the climate community should join forces in enlarging the access to and getting more people around the table. “Rather than a fixed state we are aiming to reach”, the report argues, “sustainability can be seen as a process of debate and inclusive deliberation”.¹ It also continues that debate will not be enough but that systemic change will also require to harness people-led nature based solutions.

The pie, the slices and the oven: redefine human progress

Another important contribution of the human development approach is a longstanding debate on how to best measure human progress. The Human Development Index, a composite index of education, life expectancy and national per capita income, has proven a useful tool in the political debate about shaping development objectives. With awareness rising that increasing the pie is no longer enough if not for a fair distribution of the slices, an inequality adjusted human development index was launched. Now, the “Human Development and the Anthropocene” report discusses ways of integrating planetary pressures in the metrics of human development, adding the oven in which the pie is baked to the equation.

Navigating the human development journey in the Anthropocene, reads the report, calls for a new generation of metrics. It puts some concrete ideas on the table such as adjusting the HDI's income component by subtracting the social costs of carbon and including natural capital in the definition of wealth. It also suggests accounting for greenhouse gas emissions and material footprint. Whether a composite "planetary pressures-adjusted HDI" could become a new common compass or whether a dashboard would be a more useful and readable tool has still to be discussed.

The most important question will be for the new common metric to be used to steer political debates on sustainable development pathways, way beyond developing countries for which the HDI was most often cited. The Biden Summit could pick up on that discussion and launch an initiative on replacing GDP as the reference indicator for progress. In a moment where the importance of care and the interactions between planetary pressures and human health have become visible for people around the globe, there has never been a timelier opportunity to put new ideas on how to redefine progress on the table.

Investing in pro-poor green recoveries

The Biden Summit taking place in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, and key investments for jobs and a green recovery will be one of the key themes on the agenda.² As inevitable should be a discussion on the unequal capacities of governments to plan and green their economic recovery pathways, and beyond governments the unequal way in which different populations benefit from these pathways. As part of the HDR, Voituriez and Chancel (2020) highlight that already limited in number, green recovery packages such as investment in green infrastructure, incentives for consumer purchases, support to green jobs and credit facilities for green sectors or activities, including research and development, are almost exclusively found in a few high-income countries. Exceptions are Fiji, Kenya and Uganda.

Moreover, the HDR underlines that gaps are widening for both the Environmental Health Index and the Index of Material Footprint per capita, which means that while residents in developed countries benefit from cleaner water and air, they also increase their already higher burden on the planet. Navigating human development in the Anthropocene calls for making climate action and the fight against inequalities a joint top priority. Therefore, pro-poor environmental policies should be on the agenda of the Leader's Summit. For example, how can public and private investors design high-speed train routes in a way that they do not increase even further the urban-rural divide by only connecting the big cities, or embed them in a broader investment package for railway development. As a contribution to the HDR, Voituriez and Chancel (2020) analyze how green policies may affect inequalities by looking at the incidence of impacts at the bottom, middle and top of the income distribution. If we continue the transport example, the debate should not be limited to electric vehicle subsidies but also on railway development and green bus rapid transits that benefit larger parts of the population. The Biden Summit could launch action coalitions on pro-poor environmental policies which could include comprehensive green transport development, but also clean cooking and rural electrification. From the Summit's current agenda, there is a risk to focus on pushing the technological frontier at the expense of mass-scale deployment of pro-poor (and sometimes low-tech) climate solutions.

To sum up, the human development approach with its focus on enhancing people's capabilities, experience in pro-poor policies and human development metrics has a lot to offer to the climate community. As for the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, the HDR 2020 is yet another invitation to launch broader discussions and coalitions for a sustainable economic reset.

¹ <http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/content/2020-human-development-report-next-frontier-human-development-and-anthropocene> .

2 Other themes: emission reduction announcements from major economies, finance mobilization, technological innovation, adaptation to climate impacts, sub-national and non-state actors' action. [White House]

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