

Halfway There, Long Way to Go: The Role of People's Agency in the Final Years of the Sustainable Development Goals

M Niaz Asadullah, *DPhil (Oxford)*
Department of Economics, Reading University, UK

Sridhar Venkatapuram, *DPhil (Cambridge)*
Global Health Institute, King's College London,

Giulia Greco, *PhD (LSHTM)*
Department of Global Health and Development, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine,

Ann Elizabeth Mitchell, *PhD (Maryland)*
Faculty of Economic Sciences, Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina

Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti, *PhD (Pavia)*
Department of Political & Social Sciences, University of Pavia

Alejandra Boni, *PhD (Valencia)*
INGENIO([CSIC-UPV], Valencia, Spain

Mario Biggeri, *PhD (Siena)*
University of Florence, Italy

Sophie Mitra, *PhD (Pantheon-Sorbonne)*
Fordham University, USA

Abstract: *As we mark the anniversary of the publication of the 2030 Agenda mid-term report, the world's nations stand at a crossroads. While off-track in achieving most Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), multiple crises have further exposed deep inequalities and vulnerabilities in the current dominant approach centred on economic growth and resource allocations. In this editorial paper, scholars of the human development and capabilities approach and editors of the Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, express our deep concern at the lack of progress towards the SDGs. We argue for prioritizing human development rather than economic growth and for putting human agency at the centre of development policy. This agency-centric approach includes the implementation of feedback systems for assessing human development progress through broader grassroots participation and relies critically on strengthening state capacities, safeguarding human rights, and promoting democracy.*

Introduction

The launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 sparked new optimism for achieving significant improvements in multiple indicators of human development across the world. However, nine years in, many countries are off-track in achieving most indicators by 2030 (United Nations, 2023), and many of the earlier gains have been erased or reversed (Olaberria and Reinhart, 2022). Moreover, the disorganized and inequitable national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have undermined citizen trust in governments, especially in countries where progress needs to be most accelerated (UNDP, 2022). As we mark the anniversary of the publication of the 2030 Agenda mid-term report, it is important to reflect on

SDG progress and what is needed to get back on track following the pandemic era decline in human development worldwide.

Although by the end of 2022, all countries had lifted the pandemic mobility restrictions, schools and businesses continue to strive for full recovery, and in most cases, the promises to ‘build back better’ have been empty rhetoric (Asadullah et al., 2023). The haphazard responses by government authorities to the pandemic and insufficient post-pandemic recovery efforts, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, highlight longstanding entrenched injustices and significant gaps in national capacities to robustly conceptualize and implement the SDG framework and achieve broader human development goals.

Against this background, we make the case for driving faster progress on the SDGs by prioritizing human development and empowering people to have more agency and autonomy over their lives. Human development entails expanding both people’s opportunities to be and do what they value and have reason to value (their capabilities) and supporting people's abilities to be authors of their own lives—‘the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world’ (their agency) (Sen, 1999: 17-18). Our proposal for an agency-centric approach goes beyond some recent calls to action on the SDGs through global cooperation and promotion of multilateralism through emergency vaccine finance; protection, mitigation, and adaptation to climate change; and promotion of peace and human security (Sachs et al., 2022).

The global decline in human development

Today we are in the midst of a global polycrisis in which COVID-19, armed conflicts, climate change, attacks on democracy, and rivalry among global powers have combined to create multiple challenges for human development, which are reflected in the reversal of the trend of gains in aggregate human development made over the past three decades. For the first time since UNDP began measuring human development using the Human Development Index

(HDI) in 1990, the global HDI declined for two consecutive years in 2020 and 2021 (UNDP 2022). Although the 2023 global HDI is projected to surpass the 2019 level, inequality across countries has increased. The HDI is projected to recover in all OECD countries, but in less than half of the least developed countries (UNDP, 2024). The pandemic also set back progress in reducing the multidimensional poverty index by 3 to 10 years (UNDP and OPHI, 2022) and the rate of ‘extreme income poverty’ increased from 8.9% in 2019 to 9.7% in 2020, the first increase in global income poverty in decades (World Bank, 2024).

Among the various declining measures, the HDI is of special importance, given the significant theoretical justifications for using a rich multidimensional information base to design policy and assess and monitor progress in human development (Sen, 1999).

The role of agency

Beyond the intrinsic value of agency, as emphasized by Sen (2000), agency is instrumentally valuable for expanding human development and has several implications for how to accelerate progress on the SDGs. A first implication concerns the agency role of individuals in influencing the direction of public policy and prioritizing goals. Increasing constraints on financing for sustainable development (OECD, 2023) due to shifts in donor government priorities make it more necessary than ever to both prioritize goals and identify strategies to take advantage of synergies across policies. Moreover, whether devising policies to reduce secondary school dropout in marginalized communities (Mitchell et al., 2018) or leveraging an indigenous community's relational approach to the natural world (Watene, 2016), a greater understanding of the worldviews and values of the people being affected can contribute to more effective policies. Participatory approaches informed by human development serve to foster greater community engagement and enhance social transformation through public policy (Boni et al., 2021).

However, low levels of generalized trust, increasing social polarization (UNDP, 2022) and the global deterioration of democratic institutions (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019) pose challenges for a primarily state-centred approach. Making progress in human development and its resilience to future shocks through long-term thinking and planning requires accelerating progress in building state capacities—a type of investment which proved critical for poverty reduction during the previous Millennium Development Goal era (Asadullah et al., 2018).

Second, exercising agency through political participation is of central importance to the advancement of development goals through collective action. The SDGs agenda needs to actively leverage citizen agency and bottom-up initiatives and at the same time promote and protect self-help groups and social movements.. However, with democracy’s global decline in the past two decades, citizen activism and social movements are under threat (Anheier, 2019). Democratic renewal is a vital enabler for public and collective action aimed at fostering change conducive to sustained and equitable human development (Stewart, 2018).

One means for promoting agency is to strengthen the SDG localization movement and foster greater use of tools such as voluntary local reviews (VLRs), which in turn can foster participation, the production of collective knowledge, and the empowerment of local communities (Narang Suri et al., 2021). In this context, local governments are well positioned to understand and respond to local context, needs and priorities. Similarly, the integration of deliberative processes in public decision-making can also build people’s agency. At the core of participatory governance lies the belief that all individuals affected by a particular decision should have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process without facing discrimination. Across the globe, an array of participatory methods has been employed, from town hall meetings and focus groups to public consultations, opinion polls, and participatory budgeting initiatives (Smith 2009).

It is critical to prioritize multiple forms of localization efforts for at least two instrumental reasons. First is the need to overcome the trust deficit. Citizens are more likely to trust institutions that empower them to be involved in decision-making instead of treating them merely as objects of legislation and administration (UNDP 2021). In societies with low levels of trust, weak democracy, and political polarization, collective responses are less likely unite communities around common development challenges (Biggeri and Tapia 2023). Second, localization efforts incentivize the production of the subnational indicators needed for robust, systematic and regular assessment of freedom and agency, what Sen (2000) calls ‘human development accounting’. To date there has been a huge challenge of missing data for tracking progress: data is available for just over half of all indicators and is even lower for SDG 16 (only 7% for the 9 indicators) (Dang and Serajuddin, 2020).

Conclusions

In sum, doubling down on human development by giving people greater control over their lives should be the priority for putting the 2030 Agenda back on track. UNDP’s HDI has emerged as a coordinating metric, mobilizing public opinions and national governments towards improvement of overall quality of life while challenging conventional GDP-centric thinking.

Given the risk of reversing hard-won gains, as demonstrated by the post-pandemic regression in HDI progress, there is an urgent need to mobilize global support for accelerating human development, with a central focus on human agency. An agency-centric approach, including the implementation of feedback systems to assess human development progress through broader grassroots participation, is crucial. However, such an approach also relies on effective state capacities and functional democracies. The inter-dependence between citizen agency and democracy is evident in the concept of good and ‘conscious’ governance which comprises collaborative principles and practices for effective, inclusive and ethical

management of institutions and societal resources Therefore, this approach also demands the prioritization of SDG 16, which aims to strengthen institutions that safeguard human rights, including democracy, and SDG 4 (quality education for all), as functional literacy and cognitive and communication skills are prerequisites for participation in public deliberation and democratic processes.

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