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Operationalising Human Development: A Programmatic Approach

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Why does operationalising the human development approach matter?

Human development is a broad approach that is about enlarging the range of people's choices. It focuses on enhancing capabilities and freedoms and furthers the agency aspect of individuals. The approach has had far reaching impact on development thinking.

A 'New York Consensus' on operationalising the human development paradigm was proposed, building on four policy elements of: pro-poor economic growth, accelerating social progress, expanding political freedoms and participation through political reforms, and accelerating economic and institutional reforms to improve the global environment for poor countries. This provides a very useful framework.

There are also several initiatives across the globe in evidence based policy making using the Human Development Reports. These may, however, need to be supplemented with a more specific articulation of how one integrates the human development approach in programmes at the operational level. Being able to apply the human development approach in a systematic way to programmes can enhance their on the ground as they break the silos in which government departments and ministries work. The adoption of a more holistic approach can change in fundamental ways the development strategies of governments as well as other actors such as the private sector and civil society.

What are some examples which illustrate how this can be done?

We could take two areas - poverty reduction and democratic governance which are critical for human development attainments and also the areas in which several bilateral and multilateral agencies are actively supporting programmes across countries.

In poverty reduction, for example, the question of equity could lead to advocating for pro poor, employment led growth and ensuring particularly for women and marginalized sections of the population the access to land, and credit as a right. The simultaneous emphasis on efficiency would imply that measures to enhance productivity in sectors that provide the poor with livelihoods, e.g. small scale agriculture and micro enterprises, as well as ensuring better coordination of efforts by national governments to address multi-dimensional poverty would be critical. The interventions also need to be efficient in enlarging the choices people have and therefore it is essential to identify choices, examine their pros and cons before embarking on programmes to support them. Attention to participation and empowerment would mean not only involving the poor in design and in implementation, but also ensuring broad-based ownership of poverty reduction initiatives by all the actors, viz., the government,

local bodies, private sector and civil society. Sustainability considerations need to be addressed not only in terms of environmental sustainability, but also with respect to growth being rapid enough to reduce absolute poverty and equitable enough to reduce relative poverty and inequalities.

In the realm of democratic governance, the same principles can be applied, although the interventions would be different. Equity could be translated at the very least into creation of a participatory and enabling environment for the poor and adherence to the rule of law. Efficiency/productivity is reflected in the effective functioning of all the actors, particularly government, with respect to implementation and facilitation of pro-poor initiatives. The capability of the government to spend resources meaningfully and towards attainment of pro-poor goals, and the performance of civil service in implementing pro-poor policies could also be good indicators. Emphasis on participation would imply the involvement of all actors in development. Promoting policy dialogue, decentralization, and building effective public-private-community partnerships can be tools to ensure participation. Ensuring sustainability could be achieved through capacity development, integrating governance concerns into all initiatives of development and promoting democratic values and systems.

Is this approach relevant only for UNDP or for other development actors as well?

This is an approach that is based on human development principles and specifically aimed at providing support to programmatic interventions. Anyone who believes in the human development approach and its values could adapt these interventions to their purpose. However, the principles of human development are integral to the approach and they need to be adhered to simultaneously. Paying attention to equity at the expense of efficiency, participation and empowerment and sustainability will be self-defeating as will the effort to ensure efficiency without attention being paid to the other three aspects.

Are there any constraints to the implementation of this approach?

The main constraints would be those of time and institutional capacity. Capacity development would need to be an important measure to ensure mainstreaming of human development. Financial resources may also be limited to implement a strategy which requires paying attention to all four principles simultaneously. But these issues are not insurmountable given the commitment to a people-centred development approach.

Some general sources:

1. Fukuda-Parr, Sakiko, 2003, 'Operationalising Amartya Sen's Ideas on Capabilities, Development, Freedom and Human Rights- The Shifting Policy Focus of the Human Development Approach' *Feminist Economics*, Vol 9 (2 & 3), [Click here](#)
2. Jahan, Selim, 2007, 'Human development, Equality and Economic Growth: Issues and Policies, paper presented at the Human Development and Capability Association Conference, New York [Click here](#)
3. Kaul Inge and Saraswathi Menon, 1993, *Human Development- From Concept to Action A 10-Point Agenda*, Occasional Paper No. 7, Human Development Report Office, UNDP [Click here](#)
4. UNDP, Colombo Regional Centre, 2006, *Asia Pacific Human Development Report 2006, Trade on Human Terms*, Macmillan, New Delhi [Click here](#)

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