

Human Development Report Consultations

Rethinking Human Development

Informal session hosted by HDCA, September 10, 2008, 9am-3pm,

New Delhi India

Overview

Frances Stewart chaired the session, and opened with an overview of the key issues that had been proposed for discussion. The following people participated in what was a very wide-ranging and valuable discussion. The informal notes below summarise the main points that were raised and discussed, not necessarily in chronological order. Further feedback is welcome

HDR Contribution and Objectives

Key objectives of the HDR can be outlined as followed – summarised here alongside relevant points made during the discussion :

1. Develop alternative paradigm and policies
 - Noted that HDR is sometimes placed as a centrist in debates by commentators, eg in context of education
 - To some extent the differences from the mainstream are tacit rather than explicit, but can still effectively drive analysis and policy design
2. Document relevant good practices
3. Provide material for activists
 - Readership? Leadership or grassroots
4. Provide a frame and guide for national HDRs
 - Scope for greater utilization of NHDRs in informing global reports

Thus the global HDR is still needed. Enduring value and continued relevance of HDR in terms of

1. Alternative thinking – and putting new concepts into the public domain, that are subsequently taken up by others
2. Dealing with newly arising issues, and revisiting old issues given changed context
3. Advocacy – based on evidence/ authority
4. Source of good practice for practitioners

What is different about the HDR: people centred, focus on choice and capabilities brings a much broader perspective than GDP; it includes, but is not only poverty, MDGs, poor countries

A retrospective of high and troubled points

High points – where innovative and/or authoritative, and where complex issues are seized/ tackled; and where provocative. Eg – 1990, 1994 (human security → led to a significant literature; 1995 (gender, including index); technology; culture. Plus some excellent NHDRs.

Most successful where responding to new challenges and providing new analytical tools. Need to be ahead of the curve, rather than reflecting general discussions.

Successful beyond expectations in national and local reports.. eg India.

Troubled points or less successful – where one or more of the following characterized the report:

- limited to repeating what is known,
- trying to deal with too much at once (eg trade, aid, conflict) and thereby lacking a message, or
- merely reflecting the agenda of others – eg poverty and MDG reports
- when annual report was missed
- where report aims were unclear – eg consumption
- confusion on content – eg aspects of human rights report , though agreed that successful in opening up new debates

Tendency to avoid very difficult issues – eg redistribution, when dealing with consumption.

Tension between academic rigour, versus compressed cycle and need for headlines. It was agreed that a solid intellectual basis and links to academia are key. Some argued that academic quality had sometimes fallen short. One tension noted was between portaying simple headlines that captured attention and motivated interest, versus more carefully qualified statements – eg “jobless growth”.

Another issue raised was that of “brand dilution”—in that there was such an array of local and national HDRs – however there was not general consensus that this was a problem.

Measures of success??

- Inappropriate to focus solely on media coverage, which is ephemeral, and may not make any real difference.
- Impacts on intellectual discourse ? eg citations
- Impacts on policy discourse (google investigation)
- Impacts on policy?

- Noted relative lack of influence on domestic European debates; perceived as relevant only for developing countries → national/ regional reports would be useful, like American hdr. Goind beyond the HDI

Process

Strength of the HDRO is key, including the statistics team. Importance of innovative presentation of information, including numbers.

Importance of academic backing/ support of strategic allies/ heavyweights

Need to avoid excessive bureaucratization.

Suggested the value of having concurrent preparation of two annual reports in parallel, to decompress the production schedule. Possibility of having bi-annual reports discussed, but not generally supported.

Key changes in context since 1990, relevant to HDR beyond 2010

1. Greater competition (number and range of global reports)
2. Data and other information more readily available – especially on the web
3. WB become more progressive
4. New resources: HDCA etc (see below)...
5. Global initiatives – MDGs, PRSPs, human rights approaches
6. Global climate – 1990 = end of cold war, optimism etc, now changing geo-political balance and emergence of new powers;
7. Dominant themes – rising inequality, overwhelming importance of climate change and environment – plus individual vulnerability to risks
 - Policy climate – Polanyi pendulum swinging away from the market – eg Latin America, financial sector regulation
8. Role of development assistance diminished – cf private capital, non traditional partners like China
9. Role of multilateralism
10. Many supporters and new potential allies (eg EFA movement; foundations like Gates, google)

Plus new capabilities

1. HDCA itself – 700 members, explicitly multi-disciplinary, active and often young
2. Better technology – especially communications
3. Better links to developing countries and capacity therein
4. Social movements and NGO networks

Some time was spent specifically discussing how to enhance and enable HDCA's potential contributions to the HDR process and content

1. Report process – send out note requesting inputs/ leads
2. Sub-theme of annual conference linked to GHDR annual theme – eg on measurement
3. Links to thematic groups and regional chapters
4. Launch – website discussion, host regional discussions
5. Website links – eg via front page. Access to HDCA video library etc
6. Review themes that are emerging from HDCA analysis etc
7. Various benefits, including strengthening multi-dimensionality from ethics etc sides
8. Possible reader on Philosophy of Human Development? And other Readers.

Challenge of operationalisation of HDR messages

- Importance of developing both depth – and applications – to fully ground the approach
- Influencing policy... depth/ specificity needed that global reports are unlikely to have. Indeed an underlying theme is the importance of choice, including policy choice, and avoiding mechanistic approaches and solutions, so that different solutions are appropriate to different contexts.
- Role of outreach to local groups, like trade unions

An appropriate 2010 theme is to rethink 1990 themes in light of experience, changes...

Measurement and indicators

HDRO role on cutting edge, and enabling and promoting innovation. Noted political authoritativeness of global indicators (HDI, dollar day) – but tension between global and cross-country comparisons and local relevance

Many groups now working on this issue – at policy level, eg Sarkozy group – and academics

Broader approach needed – environment, economic, social (networks etc), political, beyond HDI. However there is real value in maintaining the HDI per se in its simplicity and in its widespread recognition and acceptance.

Leads include: Political, democracy audits, Helsinki David Beacon, applied to govts, companies etc

Data presented in the report –specifically the tables. Utility noted while suggesting that it would be desirable to rationalize the number and content of the table – indeed, in general desirable to shorten text as well compared with recent issues. A strategic review of the tables is needed – do not drop only because information is also available online, since web access is limited in many poor countries and a desk reference remains useful.

→ set up a working group.

→ undertake a detailed audit of the tables – nature as well as content. Ensure value to users (eg avoid excessive use of ratios etc where the underlying information is not easily available). Good to provide sense of change.

Looking ahead:

1. Theme selection was discussed. Value of ongoing work on two themes noted, though both would need director's attention
2. Sequencing of selection
3. Frontier topics that could be usefully addressed – and/or revisited were discussed:
 - Urbanization
 - Human rights. Human security (draw on Jolly review of NHDRs)
 - Wellbeing – as the literature has grown hugely since 1990, need to relocate HD. Revisit consumption, work and social (networks etc)
 - Gender – given developments since 1995
 - Inequality – including intergenerational dimensions and sustainability as well as more conventional aspects.
 - Dynamics. And implications for phasing of interventions
 - Protection against risks and vulnerability
 - Crime and vulnerability
 - Employment
 - Human development in rich countries
 - Reconciling environment and human development – not in terms of tradeoffs, but mutual benefits
 - Politics of successful human development
 - Ageing/ life cycles
 - Group inequality
 - Knowledge
 - Institutions/ role of the state