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As Africa gains development ground, new inequalities emerge, says new UNDP report

New York, December 9, 2019 – African countries have made significant strides in advancing human development, gaining ground on primary education and health. But a **new generation of inequalities** is opening up that, left unchecked, threatens to undermine further progress and make it harder for those already behind to catch up.

So finds the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its [2019 Human Development Report, titled “Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: inequalities in human development in the 21st century.”](#)

This Human Development Report (HDR), which pioneers a more precise way to measure countries’ socioeconomic progress, says that just as the **gap in basic living standards is narrowing**, with an unprecedented number of people escaping poverty, hunger and disease, the necessities to thrive have evolved. **New inequalities are becoming more pronounced**, particularly around **tertiary education**, and the seismic effects of **technology** and the **climate crisis**.

“This is the new face of inequality,” says UNDP Administrator, Achim Steiner. “And, as this Human Development Report sets out, **inequality is not beyond solutions.**”

The report analyzes inequality in three dimensions – **beyond income, beyond averages, and beyond today** – and proposes a battery of policy options to tackle it.

Impressive progress, elusive SDGs

According to the report’s accompanying Human Development Index (HDI), **Africa has experienced one of the most significant improvements in human development**. Between 1990 and 2018 **life expectancy increased by more than 11 years**.

For the first time this year, an African country – Seychelles – has moved into the very high human development group. Others are rising in the ranks as well. Four countries – Botswana, Gabon, Mauritius and South Africa – are now in the high human development group, and 12 countries – Angola, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Sao Tome and Principe, Zambia, and Zimbabwe – are in the medium human development group.

Botswana also enjoys the region’s highest increase in HDI rank between 2013 and 2018, rising 11 places in the rankings.

Yet significant challenges remain. African countries find themselves at a crossroads, facing the **dual challenge** of ensuring that those furthest behind make progress with the basics, while paving the way for those further ahead to keep pace with the emerging requirements of today's world.

“What used to be ‘nice-to-haves’, like going to university or access to broadband, are increasingly important for success, but **left only with the basics, people find the rungs knocked out of their ladder to the future,**” says UNDP’s Pedro Conceição, Director of the HDR team.

While poverty rates have declined in across the continent, progress has been uneven. If current trends continue, the report asserts, **nearly 9 of 10 people in extreme poverty – more than 300 million – will be in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2030.**

And among countries that are off track to achieve the SDGs by 2030, most are in Africa.

At the same time, many African countries face **low tertiary education rates** and relatively **limited access to broadband**, thwarted in part by low digital literacy and skills.

By contrast, in countries with very high human development, the proportion of adults with tertiary education is growing more than six times faster and subscriptions to fixed broadband are growing 15 times faster than in countries with low human development.

“There is **much to celebrate in the unprecedented progress Africa has achieved** over the past two decades, especially in fundamentals,” says Ahunna Eziakonwa, UNDP Assistant Administrator and Regional Director for Africa. **“But the goalposts are moving,** and we need to ensure that people are well positioned today to get ahead tomorrow.”

Inequality in flux

Inequality remains very high in most African countries. According to the Inequality-Adjusted HDI accompanying the report, the continent had the highest regional loss in human development value due to inequality. As in other regions, the unequal distribution of education, health and living standards stymied countries’ progress over the reporting period.

South Africa experiences the highest rate of income inequality in the world. Over half the country’s income is held by the richest 10 percent.

At the same time, there are encouraging countertrends. Burkina Faso had the region’s largest decline in income inequality, with the bottom 40 percent growing almost twice as fast as the average. Income inequality also shrank in Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Lesotho, Mali, and Namibia.

Persistent challenges of gender parity, climate change

Despite improved gender parity in education, the report notes, **African women and girls continue to face deeply entrenched challenges** to their human development progress.

The continent has the world’s highest incidence of early marriage and adolescent childbirth, with 36 percent of women being married before their 18th birthday.

The deep-rooted social norms that yield disparate outcomes for men and women often affect people even before they are born, the report says. Policies to tackle resulting inequalities must also start at or before birth, including investing in young children’s learning, health and nutrition.

The report also underscores how the **ripple effects of climate change could exacerbate inequality**. Mozambique, for example, continues to reel from the devastation caused by back-to-back cyclones – a first in recorded history, which left nearly 2 million people in need of assistance and displaced tens of thousands.

Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today

The report recommends policies that go beyond income and are anchored in **lifespan interventions starting even before birth**. Such human capital investments must continue through a person’s life, from pre-natal care, to education, to the labour market and retirement.

And it argues that taxation must be part of a broader system of policies that enhance governance, improve public expenditure management and provide alternatives to a carbon-intensive lifestyle.

Averages hide what is really going on in society, says the HDR, and while they can be helpful in telling a larger story, much more detailed information is needed to create policies to tackle inequality effectively.

Looking beyond today, the report asks how **inequality may change in future**, particularly through the lens of **climate change** and **technological transformation**, which are shaping human development outcomes into the next century.

“**As the world changes, so do the inequalities that matter**,” says Conceição. “The good news is that they are not inevitable. Every society has a choice about the level and kind of inequality it is prepared to tolerate.”

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2019 HDR Broadcast Package:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/vl0qjm3g1nvcg4k/AABXqgDA86UkT9MLTjURmGE4a?dl=0>

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