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New UNDP Report: Global development vulnerable to “next generation” inequalities

New York, December 9, 2019 – A new United Nations Development Programme report highlights the expanding nature of global inequality, pointing to a **new generation of inequalities** which may trigger a new **great divergence in society** of the kind not seen since the Industrial Revolution nearly two centuries ago.

These are among the findings of the [2019 Global Human Development Report, released today by the United Nations Development Programme and entitled “Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: inequalities in human development in the 21st Century.”](#)

The Human Development Report (HDR), which pioneers a more holistic way to measure countries’ progress beyond economic growth alone, 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** and a **new generation of inequalities** is coming into view.

“This is the new face of inequality,” said Achim Steiner, UNDP Administrator. “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**, proposing a range of policy options to tackle it.

Regional lens

While the report is global in scope, its data and findings can be unpacked at regional levels to identify contours of inequality across world regions.

The **Arab States region has experienced significant growth in human development** over the past two decades, as measured through the report’s accompanying 2019 Human Development Index (HDI). But according to the HDI and its sister index, the 2019 Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI), the **unequal distribution of education, health and living standards has stymied progress in the region, with up to 24 percent of its human development value lost when adjusted for inequality.**

“Analysis of inequality can be a powerful lens to understand recent events in the region,” said Mourad Wahba, UNDP Acting Associate Administrator and Regional Director for Arab States. “This report calls on us all to examine inequalities in order to support efforts to promote a more equitable distribution of opportunities among people everywhere.”

In the Arab States region, gender inequality and vulnerability to conflict persist

Describing the ‘next-generation’ inequalities likely to impact development progress, the report notes for example that in countries with very high levels of human development, subscriptions to fixed broadband are growing 15 times faster and the proportion of adults with tertiary education is growing more than six times faster than in countries with low human development.

The HDI records a **14 percent gap in human development between men and women** in the Arab States region. Whereas worldwide the share of non-farming employment for women is 39 percent, that figure plummets to only 16 percent for the Arab States. The region has **one of the widest gaps in the world for women’s labour force participation**, as well as one of the lowest percentages of women without access to banking services.

Vulnerability to conflict or crisis has also rolled back the region’s human development progress, with new data showing that **Syria has lost 15 per cent of its value on the Human Development Index since 2010, and Libya has shed 10 per cent** in the same period. Since 2014, **Yemen has lost 8 per cent** of progress by this measure, rounding out research commissioned by UNDP Yemen which shows that the country’s human development has been pushed back by 21 years due to the ongoing conflict.

Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today

The report recommends policies that look at but also go beyond income, anchored in **lifespan interventions starting even before birth**, including through pre-labour market **investments in young children’s learning, health and nutrition**. Such investments must continue through a person’s life, over the course of working years and into retirement and old age.

The report further argues that taxation cannot be examined in isolation, but must be part of a system of policies, including policies for public spending on health, education, and alternatives to a carbon-intensive lifestyle.

Averages conceal the dynamics in society which really matter to people, says the report, 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** – two forces that seem set to shape human development outcomes into the next century.

Indeed, **environmental sustainability remains a challenge for the region**, which registers the world’s lowest rate of renewable energy consumption.

Pedro Conceição, HDRO Director, stresses the worldwide importance of policy responses that tackle both relative and absolute inequality.

“As the world changes, so do the inequalities that matter,” he says. “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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