



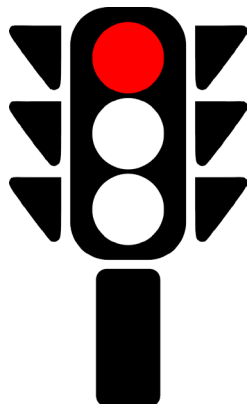
The UN & You

BY TERESA KOTTURAN SCN – JANUARY 2021

Human Development and the Anthropocene

Are we currently living in the Anthropocene age? “The Anthropocene is a new, present day epoch, in which scientists say we have significantly altered the Earth through human activity. These changes include global warming, habitat loss, changes in the chemical composition of the atmosphere, oceans and soil, and animal extinctions.” While the debate among scientists on whether to declare the current epoch as Anthropocene is inconclusive, the [Human Development Report 2020](#) from the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) states, “we are at an unprecedented moment in which human activity has become a dominant force in shaping the planet.” We are living in the age of humans—we are shaping the planet, instead of the planet shaping us. According to the report, “people’s agency and empowerment can bring about the action we need if we are to live in balance with the planet in a fairer world.” “The next frontier for human development is not about choosing between people or trees; it’s about recognizing, today, that human progress driven by unequal, carbon-intensive growth has run its course,” said Pedro Conceicao, director of UNDP’s Human Development Report Office.

In 1990, UNDP introduced the Human Development approach in advancing human wellbeing, an approach that focused on people, their opportunities and choices; it is about expanding richness of human life, rather than the richness of the economy. It is about improving the lives people lead, and not economic growth leading the wellbeing of the people. It is about providing op-



“We are at an unprecedented moment in the history of humankind and in the history of our planet. **Warning lights**—for societies and our planet—are flashing **red**.”

portunities to people to develop their abilities and a chance to use them. It is also about providing choices to people. The human development approach was developed by Mahbub Ul Haq, and is anchored in the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen’s work on human capabilities—whether people are able to “be” and “do” desirable things in life. (Beings: well fed, sheltered, healthy. Doings: work, education, voting, participation in community life.) This approach emphasizes that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing development of a country, not economic growth alone.

After 30 years, the latest human development report has incorporated two new elements: material consumption and carbon footprints, to reflect the rise in resource use and its impact on the climate. If countries are judged by their carbon footprint and use of resources, much of the progress they have made will be wiped out, because of the existing and future harms these cause to our ecosystems. The current pandemic is one of the consequences of the relentless drive for human progress. Pedro Conceicao states, “By tackling inequality, capitalizing on innovation and working with nature, human development could take a transformational step forward to support societies and the planet together.” The Planetary Pressures-Adjusted Human Development Index is a pilot, embodying the principles of the great transformation UNDP is calling for. By adjusting the HDI to include environmental factors, the index

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would measure “if both the wellbeing of people and also the planet were central to defining humanity’s progress.” The Index would map countries vertically for their material footprint and horizontally according to the traditional HDI. In doing so, the report shows, “a new global picture emerges, painting a less rosy, but clearer assessment of human progress. For example, more than 50 countries will drop out of the very high human development group, reflecting their dependence on fossil fuels and material footprint.”



Watch the presentation [“The Next Frontier”](#) for more information.

The Human Development Report 2020 provides a pathway forward and attempts to convey the urgency to act through plenty of infographics. (Almost half of the report is notes, references, statistical tables, etc.) Part I: Renewing human development for the Anthro-

pocene, has three chapters. Chapter 1 tells us where we want to go; chapter 2 provides evidence on planetary and social imbalances and their interaction; and chapter 3 shows how equity and innovation can guide human development in the Anthropocene. Part II of the report deals with how social norms, incentives for change and nature-based solutions can mobilize action

by individuals, communities and governments. Part III is about the new metrics.

“We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity for humanity to choose change, for both people and planet.” To make it a reality, we need to “empower people for equity, innovation and stewardship of nature,” the report states. People, when empowered have the capacity for transformation—for transformation is an inside job. It cannot be imposed from outside.

Read: [Human Development Report 2020 online](#)

Download/read: [Human Development Report 2020 \(PDF\)](#)

Watch: [“The Next Frontier”](#)

