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A Decade of Human Development

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A DECADE OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Amartya Sen

Public acclaim is not always a sound way of judging the success of an intellectual enterprise. John Stuart Mill's book on the Subjection of Women was his only work on which his publisher lost money; Bertrand Russell's book on mathematical logic initially had very few readers; Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations achieved its prominence only very slowly. Mozart's appreciation in the world of music came much more hesitantly than he had hoped. Speedy applause does not always greet creative contributions

In contrast, Mahbub ul Haq could not really have had any complaint that the world took a long time to appreciate the remarkable merits of his brainchild, the Human Development Report as a vehicle of communication, nor to accept the preeminence of the idea of "human development" as an illuminating concept that serves to integrate a variety of concerns about the lives of people and their well-being and freedoms. Mahbub's creation has received remarkable notice and acclaim in less than a decade. The UNDP has had better luck, in this respect, than John Stuart Mill's sponsor and publisher did.

Indeed, when I recollect the phone calls that came repeatedly from Mahbub in the summer of 1989, with his explaining to me what is going to happen (and also why I should join in this vitally important crusade), I have a sense of proximity in time that is in some tension with the way the idea of human development and the commanding presence of the Human Development Reports have become

solid parts of the contemporary landscape of social 'thinking in the international community. What 'was, barely ten Years ago, some untried thoughts in Mahbub's mind, 'with nothing much on paper, have become a central part of the manifest reality of the global thinking on evaluation and action. What must have appeared to many in the United Nations system as a rather eccentric plan of an independent minded Pakistani economist has become a central component fo critical attention in the world'of communication and public discourse.

Pluralist Conception

The question with which I want to begin is this: why has the Human Development Report received so much reflective attention with such speed in a world where new ideas often take decades - sometimes centuries - to receive the recognition they deserve? Why is the idea of human development such a success in the contemporary world? This is not a question about the profundity of Mahbub ul Haq's creative ideas, which is, of course, absolutely clear and not in any way in dispute. At a very basic level of social understanding, the Human Development Reports had - and have much to offer to the discerning public. But the value of new knowledge and understanding is not always - indeed not often- quickly recognized, and the swift success of the approach of human development has to be judged in that context. For one thing, the Human Development Reports have experienced a much more rapid appreciation and general acceptance than any of us (involved in

helping Mahbub). had expected less than a decade ago. We must ask, why has this happened?!

That raises a more elementary question. What does the human development accounting, in fact, do? What is its special feature, its identifying characteristic? This is, at one level, an easy question to answer. Rather than concentrating only on some solitary and traditional measure of economic progress (such as the **gross national product per head**) "human development" accounting involves a systematic examination of a wealth of information about how human beings in each society live (including their state of education, and health care, among other variables). It brings to the exercise of development evaluation an inescapably pluralist conception of progress. Human lives are battered and diminished in all kinds of different ways, and the first task, seen in this perspective, is to acknowledge that deprivations of very different kinds have to be, accommodated within a general overarching framework. The framework must be cogent and coherent, but must not try to overlook the pluralities that are crucially involved in the diverse nature of 'deprivations in a misguided search for some one measure of success and failure, some single clue to all the other disparate concerns.

As the decade of adventurous entry comes to an end, it is extremely importance to understand the basic characteristics that underlie the success of the idea of human development and the practice of presenting these reports. The future of the

enterprise of human development will inescapably be very different from the past in all kinds of particular ways. It is incredibly important to identify the basic comprehension of social evaluation and assessment that makes the enterprise, of human development what it is, and which is captured however imperfectly in these reports and analyses. The issue of plurality and openness to multiple concerns is quite central to the, success of the exercise.

In a few minutes time when I come to ideas about the future, this basic and elementary feature will become particularly crucial to seize.

It is important to distinguish the general idea of a pluralist conception from the more specific proposals on which human development accounting has tended to rely, involving the integration of particular criteria such as life expectancy, literacy and indicators of economic affluence. Mahbub's innovation was, in an important sense, a philosophical departure:

I say this with hesitation, since Mahbub was always very sceptical of philosophy, and his affectionate teasing of my intellectual pretensions was most effective when he chastised my attempt to invoke some rudimentary philosophy into the hardware of United Nations Plaza and Uganda House. But let me continue nevertheless (as Mahbub once told me, "Go on saying the same thing again and again, and may be one day we will listen!") .

Utilitarianism and Singlemindedness

To understand what is involved in Mahbub's innovative

departure in the world cf. traditional development evaluation, it is useful to consider an analogy, involving the hold of utilitarian philosophy over rivals as the dominant form of ethical reasoning, especially in the Anglo-American intellectual tradition. The utilitarian calculus involves a quintessentially single-minded approach to ethical accounting. The one variable on which it concentrates, viz. utility, has some plausibility if, for some obligatory reason, we have to choose only one variable - exactly one and no other - for our ultimate focus. Indeed, it cannot be denied that avoiding pain and suffering must be a good thing, or that happiness is an important reward of living, No ethical accounting can 'really ignore this elementary understanding. But even those who concede-this readily may easily identify many other features of human life and social events that are also significant. Why not take note of them, in addition to utilities in the form happiness, or desire fulfilment, or whatever metric the utilitarians advocate?

There is, in fact, the rub. In the intellectual victory that utilitarian accounting achieved in mainstream moral philosophy quite a bit of the work was done, often implicitly, by the trumped-up belief that it would be somehow analytically mistaken - or at least ferociously clumsy to have different things as being simultaneously valuable. John Stuart Mill himself worried a great deal about the plausibility of a pluralist informational base for ethical evaluation, and the same guy who had brought so many

plural concerns to philosophical light also seemed full of analytical panic in going for a system with many irreducible components.

Indeed, Mill retained full loyalty to utilitarianism, against all odds. Indeed, once the need for having one - and only one - object of value is accepted, utilitarianism has a much easier run than it would have if it had to deal with the contending claims of pluralist rivals. If there must be, after all, only one good thing, then it seems plausible enough that this good thing must 'be some version or other of happiness or desire fulfilment. The rival monoconcentration theories (such as the fulfilment of rights, no matter what consequences follow from that) had an uphill battle, because it is so hard to claim that it matters not at all whether people are happy or intensely unhappy. Utilitarianism, thus', won a relatively easy victory in this unequal battle (not the kind 'of victory, to use a cricketing analogy, that Pakistan may legitimately expect over a slightly weaker India, but the kind that Pakistan may sanguinely expect over, say, Scotland or the Netherlands).

If this analysis is right, then utilitarianism's dominance can be plausibly understood not through the claim that it gives the best answer to the general question "how should we value alternative possibilities?", but from shifting the question to a monoconcentrationist field: terms of what one variable should we sensibly judge alternative possibilities?" The advocates of

other concerns were then forced to relate the objects of their concern, directly or indirectly, to utilities. For example, diminution of freedoms are bad, seen in this limited perspective, not because freedom is itself important, but precisely because indeed only because - loss of freedom ultimately causes loss of happiness and misery. Treating people unequally is bad (again, in this limited perspective) just because that makes many people very unhappy. The victory of utilitarianism not only suppressed the claims of rival theories, it also corrupted and deformed the intellectual basis of the claims underlying these theories by making their advocates opt for a subsidiary route to influence via their effects on utilities. The utilitarian emperor offered little native kingdoms, under strict viceregal supervision, to advocates of freedom, rights, equal treatment and many other putative claimants to ethical authority.

-- The rejuvenation of ethics and political philosophy in recent decades, led particularly by John Rawls (certainly the greatest moral philosopher of this century), involved, among many other things, a rebellion against the formulaic and reductionist programme established by the dominance of utilitarianism. Rawls brought many more concerns and a wealth of ideas into the analysis, beginning with his radical insistence on the "fairness" of processes, and proceeding to the priority of liberty, on the one side, to resistance to arbitrary privileges, on the other, and finally to an irreducible concern with both efficiency and equity

in the distribution of basic resources, as the final part of this complex claim. On the way to a different 'system, Rawls.Had to brush off, in effect, the utilitarian special pleading in iavour of a monoconcentrationist playing field. Once Rawls opened the door out of the reductionist prison, many rival theories have flourished in contemporary moral and political philosophy, without having to pay homage to the centrality of utility as the one great thing that . overshadows' all other individual claimants to that preeminence.

Development and Monoconcentration

What has happened in the field of development evaluation can' be better understood in terms of this analogy. Riding initially as a kind of younger brother of utility, the concept of real income had managed to get a very special.status in applied work in development economics. The basis of real income evaluation in pure economic theory has almost always been utility (as any serious student of real income evaluation would know), but in the rugged world of measurement, the concentration shifted from the foundational concern with utilities (often very difficult to get at with measurable data) to a practical involvement with income statistics and evaluations based on that.

It was, thus, not unnatural that the world of economic evaluation was dominated by concepts such as the Gross National Product (GNP), or perhaps some distribution-adjusted version of aggregate income. If interest was expressed by some sceptic on

the possibility that something else could also matter, the prompt response tended to take the form of pointing how messy the world of plural evaluation must be. The devotees of what is called "an operational metric" declared victory over all pluralist rivals by insisting that some monoconcentration alternative would be needed.

In this playing field, it was not so easy to defeat the dominance of utility, and in practice, of the GNP or other related income-based measures.

Plural Concerns in Development

It is this faith in monoconcentration that had begun to receive much sceptical attention by the time the Human Development Reports were launched. Mahbub took on the leadership of large armies of discontent that were gunning, somewhat sporadically, at the singleminded concentration on the GNP. There were activists arguing for the recognition of "basic needs." There were international interventionists lamenting "the state of the world's children." There were relief organizations concerned with hunger and epidemics. There were writers focusing on "disparities" between the actual lives of the rich and the poor. There were humanists voicing the need for social justice in the quality of life. There were advocates of measures of physical quality of life. And there were even some philosophically oriented critics wondering about the bigger insights into social ethics provided in the far-reaching works of Aristotle, of Adam Smith, of Karl Marx, and even of John Stuart Mill. It is to the credit of Mahbub's

integrating vision that he saw the possibility of harnessing these different discontents into the development, of a capacious alternative outlook that would be at once practical and broad, and could accommodate - however roughly - these different concerns. If the idea of human development had a rapid acceptance, this was made possible by the skill - ultimately Mahbub ul Haq's skill - in coordinating discontent and in weaving them together into a- rival and flexible format.

Not surprisingly, the same charges were brought against him that had been used earlier to keep utilitarianism victorious in a specially devised playing field, and there was no end of grumbles that the diverse concerns on which Mahbub concentrated did not automatically yield one "operational metric." Of course, it didn't; it could not - and should not - have. The domain of social valuation cannot be taken over by some kind of an allegedly value-neutral engineering solution. It is important that people explicitly and critically evaluate what we want, and engage in arguing for - or against - any set of proposed weights. What weights may emerge is ultimately a matter for social choice, not to be taken over by some kind of a mechanical reading of an apparent "truth." Central to this exercise is enlightened public discussion. Supporting the intellectual basis of well-informed public discussion is one of the main glories of the human development enterprise.

The idea of human development because the world was ready

for it. Mahbub gave it what it had been demanding in diverse ways for some decades preceding that. Mahbub's impatience with theory, which (I have to confess) I sometimes found quite frustrating, was a great help in this. He wanted to build on agreement (what Cass Sunstein, the Chicago legal theorist, calls "an incompletely theorized agreement"). Such agreements may emerge 'pragmatically, on quite diverse grounds, after a general recognition that many things are important. Mahbub transformed the inquiry into an intensely practical one. He told the world:, "Here we have a broad framework; if you want something to be included in this list, which may deserve a table in the Human Development Report (and with incredible luck, may even be considered for inclusion in one of the indices like the Human Development Index, or the Human Poverty index), tell us what, and explain why it must figure in this accounting. We will listen." Liberated from the monoconcentrationist shackles, the world of evaluation was open to pragmatic reasoning, invoking different kinds'of argument within a broad and permissive framework of reasoned social evaluation.

The Future

What lessons, then, do we draw from this reading of the basis of the speedy success of the idea of human development and the soundness enterprise of Human Development Reports? I shall briefly point to a few.

First, it would be a great mistake to concentrate too much on the Human Development Index, or on any other such aggregative

index. (As perhaps the principal author of Human Development Index, I say this with some hesitation, but no less firmly for that reason; it is not a case of infanticide any way, since the infant has now grown up, and can take the rough with the smooth.)

These are useful indicators in rough and ready work; but the real merit of the human development approach lies in the plural attention it brings to bear on developmental evaluation, not in the aggregative measures it presents as an aid to digestion of diverse statistics.

Second, the very lack of a general theory allows an openness that is important for this kind of work. Mahbub himself experimented with some departures, such as the inclusion of an index of political freedom. That particular departure was not, I think, a success, but it is important to be open to suggestions, and not to stifle further broadening on any a priori ground.

For example, the advocates of human rights have suggested that the enterprise of human development should take them more seriously. This is a justified demand. May be this will be a good extension; or may be it will not prove to be so. But it has to be carefully examined and tried out. The same can be said of a variety of ideas that have been proposed for further extending the domain of coverage of human development accounting. The adventure of the decade to come must not be turned into any repeated chanting of mantras, no matter how exalted the mantras may be.

Third, as and when we face new problems, the focus of

attention has to be sensitive' to the new reality. In the heyday of initiation, of human development reporting a decade ago, some countries were doing astonishingly well despite low income, through concentration on particular types of social interventions, such as educational expansion; basic health care and epidemiology, and so on. The HDR duly recorded their success. But it emerged that some of these economies also-.had basic problems that had not been adequately addressed, in the form of lack of transparency in business transactions which made them rather fragile. Perhaps more importantly, there was also the extreme vulnerability in a downturn of those whose economic viability depended entirely on a buoyant market - without any social safety net. While people were united on the way up, they were often very divided as they fell. The importance of this phenomenon, that. of human security in general, requires a reorientation of factual concentration and of proper reflection in development accounting.

Fourth, there is the issue of democracy - its acceptance and its working and practice. This too needs to be more fully taken up in the broad picture of human development. There is, related to that, the issue of accountability and the sharing of social responsibility.

I can, of course, go on (Mahbub often grumbled that I usually did). But before stopping I would just like to note that what we have to build on is not any received and frozen theory from Mahbub ul Haq, but on his openminded approach, on his scepticism, and on

his perpetual willingness to listen to new suggestions. The human development approach assumed the leadership of a pluralist world of multiple concerns and its intellectual departure has a coordinating function that is 'Quite central' to the entire enterprise. Unfreedoms in the world come in many different forms. Many disparate failings and shortfalls need attention. And, furthermore, the world itself is changing even as we look at it and report on it. It is this diverse and dynamic reality on which the enterprise of human development has to concentrate. It is a stream, not a stagnant pool.