

Back to previous page

document 1 of 1



## INTERNATIONAL: 'Human development' needs a re-think **OxResearch Daily Brief Service.** (Sep 25, 2012).

Find a copy

[http://sfxhosted.exlibrisgroup.com/nps?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&rft\\_val\\_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&genre=unknown&sid=ProQ:ProQ%3Aoxresearch&atitle=INTERNATIONAL%3A+%27Human+development%27+needs+a+re-think&title=OxResearch+Daily+Brief+Service&issn=&date=2012-09-25&volume=&issue=&spage=1&au=&isbn=&jtitle=OxResearch+Daily+Brief+Service&btitle=](http://sfxhosted.exlibrisgroup.com/nps?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&genre=unknown&sid=ProQ:ProQ%3Aoxresearch&atitle=INTERNATIONAL%3A+%27Human+development%27+needs+a+re-think&title=OxResearch+Daily+Brief+Service&issn=&date=2012-09-25&volume=&issue=&spage=1&au=&isbn=&jtitle=OxResearch+Daily+Brief+Service&btitle=)

### **Abstract (summary)**

The limitations of the 'human development' concept.

The current human development agenda is an improvement on a purely economic concept of development, and conveys a vision of social aspiration, as embodied in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, it is weak in explaining how the choices of individuals are reconciled, and relies on an ideal form of rational politics to achieve this end.

### **Full Text**

**SUBJECT:**The limitations of the 'human development' concept.

**SIGNIFICANCE:**The current human development agenda is an improvement on a purely economic concept of development, and conveys a vision of social aspiration, as embodied in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, it is weak in explaining how the choices of individuals are reconciled, and relies on an ideal form of rational politics to achieve this end.

**ANALYSIS: Impacts.**

Human-induced climate change has undermined the idea that development is a wholly benign process of capability expansion.

The concept of human development has an improved focus on campaigns for global social justice.

However, it tends to ignore complex social dynamics.

The latest major re-working of the concept of 'development' produced the human development agenda. It took place under the intellectual leadership of Sen, an economist turned philosopher, and like-minded colleagues.

### **Capabilities approach .**

Rejecting both utility (psychic satisfaction) and commodities (goods and services) as sensible measures of human flourishing, Sen proposed a third measure of development. It was the "actual living that people manage to achieve" or, beyond this, "the freedom to achieve actual livings that one can have reason to value". The purpose of development was to expand each person's range of choices -- their "capability set".

Sen's capabilities approach resolved many issues that had been in dispute:

It showed that income differences (whether between countries or individuals) should not be the only focus of policy concern, because income is a misleading indicator of well-being.

Well-being has to be assessed over a much broader spectrum of influences, of which economic activity and the resulting income is only one -- albeit an important one.

Nutrition, health, education, gender equality and personal security are also vital ingredients of well-being (see *INTERNATIONAL: Poverty aspects challenge policymakers - December 21, 2011*).

Hence, Sen's vision of development became about much more than just generating increases in future output that individuals could passively consume. Output and income were demoted as the prime aims of development, instead becoming seen as the means to achieve the true aim, namely, expanding people's capability sets. That aim requires the exercise of agency by individuals, and that in turn requires 'empowerment' and the removal of constraints on the exercise of agency. Sen's re-definition of 'development' as 'human development' across a much broader canvas thus validated the widening of disciplinary focus from development economics to multi-disciplinary development studies ( see *INTERNATIONAL: Development economics loses coherence - April 19, 2012*).

A reconstructed norm of development and a new pedagogy were not the full extent of Sen's philosophical ambition. Additionally, he proposed research to establish an empirical case that progress along one dimension of freedom causes progress along other dimensions of freedom, so that the capabilities approach leads to policies that reinforce each other and are coherent in practice.

### **A partially re-worked concept.**

Yet Sen's reconstruction of the development concept, despite its scope, power and grandeur, remains a partial one.

Reason plays a central role in Sen's normative scheme because the functions and capabilities that are to be expanded are those that "the individual has reason to value". Yet this raises the question of who decides which functionings and capabilities the individual has reason to value. Sen objected to the attempt by Martha Nussbaum, a law professor at Chicago, to enumerate all the desirable capabilities, so it is clear that he did not envisage that morality experts are to evaluate the reasonableness of individual desires.

Yet the question remains whether the individual -- if he/she decides on the reasonableness of his/her desires -- acts on some internal notion of what constitutes human flourishing for himself/herself and for others. Alternatively, he/she may simply value certain functions and capabilities according to whatever reasoning capacity they happen to possess:

If it is the former, this option seems to underestimate the full range of human behaviour and choices, which includes much that is anti-social and destructive of self and exploitative of others.

If it is the latter, it seems to put too heavy a burden on public discussion and decision-making procedures as the means of constraining those individuals who value those capabilities that enable them to exploit and dominate others.

For the weighting of individual advantages, Sen relies completely on the existence of a collective or political sphere in which public priorities are settled by reason. In this ideal forum, reason is expected to prevail, by means of open public discussion and critical scrutiny. He recommends specific institutions to facilitate the discussion of public policy (freedom of association, a free media and a vibrant civil society) and rational decision-making (democratic political forums). He has long argued that famine could not occur where such institutions are in place.

### **Development as freedom .**

Sen summarised his position in his 1999 book "Development as Freedom". He argued that the process of development is not essentially different from the history of overcoming what he called "unfreedoms". However, development regarded simply as the history of overcoming "unfreedom" today seems to be in need of a re-think:

The normative re-definition of development may need to be supplemented by an explanation of how expanding freedom in a globalised world can undermine capabilities as well as allow them to multiply.

The very same forces that have generated progress under globalisation can also undermine them (*see INTERNATIONAL: Job insecurity fuels 'de-globalisation' - July 4, 2012*).

### **Test case.**

The current financial and economic crisis illustrates the double-sided nature of freedom. The state of freedom in the run up to the sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2008-9 was extensive and expanding. Public discussion was largely unconstrained in an increasing number of countries, democratic decision-making was in full flow, and economic opportunities were unhampered. Economic restrictions were being abolished and specific capabilities of the poorest, in respect of housing and shelter, were actually being expanded.

Nonetheless, sub-prime mortgage lending precipitated financial collapse, a huge bank bail out at the expense of the taxpayer, and drastic cuts in a wide range of public services in order to reduce the consequent fiscal deficits. The present onset of austerity is something that development (conceived as the triumph of freedom) simply does not explain ( *see INTERNATIONAL: Austerity means changing role for state - November 24, 2011*).

Development occurs by processes of experiment and innovation, whose consequences are

unknowable in advance. The unconstrained exercise of human agency generates contradictory forces, which constantly change the contexts in which people are able to act.

Seen in this light, development can be dangerous:

Accidents happen and experiments go wrong.

Entire populations, Sen suggests, should conduct a public discussion, and then decide how far to adapt their traditional culture to gain the advantages of modernity.

**CONCLUSION:** Grand narratives about 'what development is' are going out of fashion, and the current human development agenda may never be updated. Yet to the extent that a younger generation of thinkers do attempt an overall conceptualisation of their subject, they are unlikely to remain satisfied with the mantra of 'development as freedom', proposed by Amartya Sen. Older ideas -- such as Joseph Schumpeter's notion of development as creative destruction -- will probably be the starting point for any future concept building or re-think.

Copyright Oxford Analytica Ltd. 2012. No publication or distribution is permitted without the express consent of Oxford Analytica.

---

## Indexing (details)

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>Subject</b>              | International;<br>Economic conditions;<br>Education;<br>Economic growth;<br>Public health;<br>Human rights;<br>International relations;<br>Public policy |
| <b>Company</b>              | United Nations, UN   |
| <b>Classification</b>       | 9180: International, 1220: Social trends & culture   |
| <b>Identifier / keyword</b> | International, Economic conditions, Education, Economic growth, Public health, Human rights, International relations, Public policy                      |
| <b>Title</b>                | INTERNATIONAL: 'Human development' needs a re-think  |
| <b>Publication title</b>    | OxResearch Daily Brief Service   |
| <b>Pages</b>                | n/a  |
| <b>Publication year</b>     | 2012   |
| <b>Publication date</b>     | Sep 25, 2012   |
| <b>Year</b>                 | 2012   |
| <b>Publisher</b>            | Oxford Analytica Ltd   |
| <b>Place of publication</b> | Oxford   |

|                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Country of publication</b>  | United Kingdom  |
| <b>Journal subject</b>         | BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS  |
| <b>Source type</b>             | Reports   |
| <b>Language of publication</b> | English   |
| <b>Document type</b>           | News  |
| <b>ProQuest document ID</b>    | 1069369903  |
| <b>Document URL</b>            | <a href="http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1069369903?accountid=12702">http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1069369903?accountid=12702</a> |
| <b>Copyright</b>               | Copyright Oxford Analytica Ltd. 2012. No publication or distribution is permitted without the express consent of Oxford Analytica.  |
| <b>Last updated</b>            | 2012-09-27  |
| <b>Database</b>                | OxResearch  |

---

Copyright © 2013 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. Terms and Conditions