

Human Development and the Catholic Social Tradition

Towards an Integral Ecology

Séverine Deneulin

First published 2021

ISBN: 978-0-367-63961-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-63963-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-12153-4 (ebk)

Conclusion

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003121534-5

The OA chapter is funded by: Laudato Si' Research Institute



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Conclusion

In December 2020, the UNDP released its thirtieth anniversary *Human Development Report*, entitled *The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene* (referred to in what follows as the *Report*). The *Report* takes the human development framework in new directions which mirror many of this book's arguments. Whether the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the Pope's visit to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi in November 2015, and his meeting with its then Executive Director, Achim Steiner, and now Administrator of UNDP¹ had an influence on the *Report* is difficult to establish. The many alarm bells about the last call for action that have been raised by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,² and by many other institutions and prominent individuals like Sir David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg, and not least the Covid-19 global pandemic, have undoubtedly influenced the radical change of course in the way the *Human Development Reports* have conceived development so far. This concluding chapter critically discusses the *Report* in the light of the arguments laid out in the previous chapters.

Sen's capability approach to development and that of the UNDP reports have been very close from the outset. Under the direction of Mahbub ul-Haq, previous minister of planning in Pakistan, and Sen's long-time friend since their PhD student days at the University of Cambridge, the UNDP launched in 1990 its flagship annual publication.³ The Human Development Index (HDI), a composite index which integrates life expectancy, years of schooling, and gross domestic product per capita, would become the trademark of the reports. The political success of the HDI would however come to eclipse the richness of the human development lens. Human development is not an index but a conceptual framework to assess how people's lives are doing and to analyse what may hinder or facilitate the conditions under which people can live flourishing lives.⁴

This book has considered human development as the conception of development which can be derived from the freedom perspective, in its dual aspects of well-being and agency that Sen has proposed. It has therefore taken human development and Sen's capability approach to development as synonyms and interchangeable.⁵ Its fundamental features include attention to the kinds of lives that people live, concern for the vulnerable and marginalized, and the centrality of agency in transforming situations and creating the conditions for people to live better lives. Another fundamental feature, which this book has often emphasized, is its open-endedness. The *Report* describes human development as a 'journey, not a destination' (UNDP 2020: 6). It views the human development approach as 'permanently under construction' and 'open ended to new and emerging challenges and opportunities' (UNDP 2020: 43). Given the current context of climate emergency, and the global pandemic which has laid bare the deep interconnections between all life systems, the *Report* is framing a new human development narrative, which 'places people's interaction with nature in historical, social, and economic contexts, informed by insights from the natural sciences' (UNDP 2020: 53). This integration of human and earth systems marks a departure from previous reports. The environment is no longer seen as a separate realm, acting as a constraint upon or facilitator of human flourishing. Humans are part of nature and not separate from it. The human development challenge is therefore 'to redress both social and planetary imbalances' (UNDP 2020: 22), to 'expand human freedoms in balance with the planet' (UNDP 2020: 104).

The *Report* both extends the conception of human development to integrate the earth, and maintains a central concern for people's lives, especially the marginalized, and for human agency. The running theme of the *Report* is that we have the choice to continue business as usual, and face catastrophic consequences, or to live differently. It characterizes the Anthropocene as an 'age defined by human choice' (UNDP 2020: iii). If we humans have through our actions modified the earth's crust, so too we can choose to act differently to address current social and planetary imbalances. If the rallying call of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* is that it is 'we human beings above all who need to change' (LS 202) to remedy the damage we have done, this is also the rallying call of the 2020 *Human Development Report*. It is we humans who have to choose to do things differently.

One way in which the *Report* has chosen to do things differently is by changing its flagship Human Development Index. It proposes a new experimental index, the Planetary Pressures-adjusted HDI (P-HDI), which adjusts the HDI with a factor that includes measures of per capita carbon dioxide emissions and material footprints (UNDP 2020: 235–6). Its aim is to incentivize change and 'learn from countries which are moving in the right

direction' (UNDP 2020: 235). Norway and Iceland, for example, make it into the top five in the HDI ranking but are down 15 and 26 places respectively in the P-HDI ranking. Luxembourg and Singapore are the countries which experience the largest fall in ranking, making them among the least sustainable countries in those terms. Costa Rica improves its ranking significantly when its HDI is adjusted for planetary pressures.⁶

One of the *Report's* central arguments is that planetary and social imbalances reinforce each other. Imbalances in human systems, such as inequality and lack of voice and representation of those most at risk of climate change, lead to imbalances in earth systems. This then deepens imbalances of human systems with the poor suffering most from planetary imbalances. In sum, one could say that the more than 400 pages of the *Report* elaborate and expand the following two sentences of *Laudato Si'*: 'The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation' (LS 48); 'Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor' (LS 49). One could also say that the *Report* fleshes out the implications of *Laudato Si'*'s argument that 'everything is connected' (LS 16, 70, 91, 117, 220, 240). It takes the interconnectedness among all life systems as a fundamental category. It sees 'social and natural systems as embedded in each other' (UNDP 2020: 23). It contends that 'the human development journey cannot be separated from the web of life we are embedded in' (UNDP 2020: 21). It considers the narrative of the Anthropocene as 'a catalyst for systemic thinking about the interdependence of people and nature' (UNDP 2020: 55). It argues for 'reimagining the human development journey as one in which people are embedded in the biosphere' (UNDP 2020: 223). It takes inspiration in that regard from indigenous peoples in the United States for whom:

Nature is understood as full of relatives not resources, where inalienable rights are balanced with inalienable responsibilities and where wealth itself is measured not by resources ownership and control, but by the number of good relationships we maintain in the complex and diverse life systems of this blue green planet.

(UNDP 2020: 88)⁷

The *Report* does not make value judgements about whether one should abandon the language of seeing nature as a set of natural resources or whether one should start talking instead of nature as a set of relatives to whom one has obligations. As it says on many occasions, it wants to open

up a conversation about how to live differently, how to take different actions, how to make different policy decisions. UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner expresses the aspiration for the *Report* ‘to open a new conversation on the path ahead for each country – a path yet unexplored’ (UNDP 2020: iii). This is a similar call to that found in *Laudato Si’*, in which Pope Francis ‘urgently appeal[s] for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet’ (LS 11).

References are made to religious traditions, and wisdom traditions more widely, as conversation partners in the public reasoning process on how humans can act differently so as to reestablish the balance between human and earth systems. It mentions the Quranic concept of *tawheed* (oneness), which points to the unity of all creation and past and future generations (UNDP 2020: 88);⁸ *Laudato Si’* for a Christian interpretation of this unity of all creation and our embeddedness in nature (UNDP 2020: 88); the Māori notion of *whakapapa*; and the Latin American indigenous notion of ‘good living’ or living in harmony (UNDP 2020: 90; cf. Chapter 2). The *Report* concludes that ‘recognizing our humanity as part of a larger network of connections that include all living things is part of philosophical traditions worldwide’ (UNDP 2020: 88).

Another of the central themes of the *Report* is the role of agency. It is a certain way of exercising our human freedom that has led to the current imbalances. As the *Report* puts it, ‘Human choices, shaped by values and institutions, have given rise to the interconnected planetary and social imbalances we face’ (UNDP 2020: 5). The *Report* makes several references to Sen’s argument that ‘[t]he reach of reasoned and interactive agency . . . can be particularly crucial for our transition to sustainability’ (Sen 2013: 18).⁹ It discusses the role of public reasoning, agency, and collective action in changing a society’s values around nature and social norms about what is acceptable or non-acceptable behaviour – for example, flying to a destination when less carbon-intensive means of transport are available. There is however a departure from previous reports on the centrality of freedom and agency. The exercise of human freedom is this time oriented towards what the Catholic social tradition would call the common good, which the *Report* understands as a restored balance between human and earth systems, or the promotion of flourishing of both each person and ecosystems. The *Report* asks, ‘How can we use our power to expand human freedoms while easing planetary pressures?’ (UNDP 2020: 70). Humans can choose to act and transform their societies to make them carbon neutral and with zero waste while attending to the most marginalized, or they can choose to do nothing or little. Perhaps the *Report* could have mentioned in that regard Sen’s distinction between an optimal and maximal decision. It may not be possible to decide whether it is better to reduce carbon emissions through

‘having a carbon-pricing through a market mechanism’ (alternative x) or through ‘regulating and banning of certain carbon activities’ (alternative y) (Sen 2017a: 461). One should bear in mind that alternative z, doing nothing, is worse than alternative x or y (Sen 2017a, 2017b).¹⁰ Sen (2017a: 458) concludes that instead of continuing the search for ranking ‘x’ against ‘y’, leaving the pair unranked, and making a choice despite no best solution and despite difference of views, is not unreasonable; it ‘may even be a common outcome of reasoned analysis of ethical and political evaluation’ (Sen 2017a: 458).

As in the Catholic social tradition, the 2020 *Human Development Report* also integrates the self as a subject of development (cf. Chapter 1). Its emphasis on human agency applies at both the individual and the collective level. We have to make choices, as individuals and as groups (in terms of transport, diet, modes of consumption and production, etc.), and become stewards of nature (UNDP 2020: 88–93). In its rethinking of human development, it argues for paying attention to the ‘value of people’s inner lives’ (UNDP 2020: 112)¹¹ and also ‘for the need to rethink “human,” our humanity’ (UNDP 2020: 112). What are the conditions that make us human has become a key question for development research, as the Catholic social tradition had long argued (cf. Chapter 2). The co-construction of human and non-human natures in different cultures needs to become an essential area of inquiry (UNDP 2020: 112).

As in previous years, the *Report* emphasizes the importance of analysing and changing power relations, but it does so with much more prominence. Its underlying message is that human and life systems will not be brought back into balance without a radical transformation of power relations, and without addressing socio-economic and political inequalities, for ‘nature’s [and human] degradation is often linked with power imbalances’ (UNDP 2020: 72). This is why the *Report* urges us ‘to seriously attend to the structural conditions and violence creating and perpetuating inequalities – and listen to and include the experiences and priorities of those most marginalized’ (UNDP 2020: 113). It makes a plea for the voices of those who suffer from environmental and social harms to be better represented in policy decision-making processes. Like Pope Francis who, citing a Latin American poem, lamented that ‘The timber merchants have members of parliament, while our Amazonia has no one to defend her’ (QA 9), so does the *Report* lament that ‘Many vulnerable communities lack the financial resources and organizational clout to sustain a long-term fight when there is a threat to their well-being. And they have fewer advocates and lobbyists pushing for their interests at the national level’ (UNDP 2020: 67). When they try to speak out and defend their lives, ‘they are limited . . . by asymmetries in power that muffle their voices’ (UNDP 2020: 68).

Given the similarities between the Catholic social tradition and the reimagined human development perspectives of the 2020 *Human Development Report*, one could wonder whether bringing them into dialogue has now become redundant. There are however some significant mutually beneficial contributions that both can continue to offer. The contributions from the human development approach that this book has highlighted are a greater engagement with a gender perspective and a richer empirical social and political analysis. These could be included much more in further developments of the Catholic social tradition. The *Report* offers many examples of analysing social realities taking into account the differentiated impact of climate change on women, and especially women who live in situations of vulnerability. It also provides more detailed analysis of how power relations, and the lack of voice and representation of marginalized communities, affect people's lives and increase ecological pressures.

This book has highlighted that opening up to the spiritual dimension in development entails being open to the values of love and friendship, of gift, of transcendence. In some ways, the reimagined human development perspective of the *Report* does the same by referring to indigenous and religious traditions that see nature as a gift that is bequeathed to future generations and with whom humans are in mutual relationships. But it does not develop this much – for example, on how love can provide the foundation of solidarity and the motivation from which to make choices that bring human and planetary systems back into balance with each other. For the Catholic social tradition, development is not complete without love (cf. Chapter 1). This focus on love can provide the motivation for choosing differently, for living differently, for making different policy choices, and also for accepting some of the sacrifices or inconveniences which may go with it. Love leads to attentiveness, to listening to the silenced vulnerable and suffering person and to the earth (cf. Chapter 2). It starts a process of journeying together, whatever our levels of privilege and vulnerability, on a path of mutual transformation (cf. Chapter 3). Through its presence among both vulnerable and more privileged communities, the Catholic Church could play a more significant role in building networks of global solidarity and in being a channel through which those voices silenced by power relations could be amplified. The Amazon Synod in October 2019 was a step in that direction, in providing a discussion platform where vulnerable communities could express what ails their lives and be strengthened in their representative organizations.

The Catholic social tradition put forward the concept of integral human development in the late 1960s to articulate its perspective on international development. In 2015, it put forward the concept of integral ecology, while continuing to use the former. The two could be seen as synonyms, with

the former more common in the development studies/social sciences field and the latter in the environmental studies/natural sciences field.¹² The UN has translated the development perspective that Amartya Sen has as ‘human development’. In 2020, it has continued to use the terminology of ‘human development’ to articulate its perspective on international development, albeit radically rethinking its meaning by moving it in the direction of integral human development/integral ecology. These so-called secular and faith-based perspectives are moving in the same direction. Whatever the name given – human development, integral human development, or integral ecology – there is only one way forward for humanity: to rethink what it means to be human and become more aware of our common belonging in a common home, together with other human beings as well as animals, plants, rivers, air, soil, glaciers, and other components of earth systems. The challenge remains of how the analytical lenses of human development (in its renewed 2020 vision) and integral human development/integral ecology could combine forces to become mobilizing frames for all actors at all levels of society. Were they to do so, they could enable households, educational bodies, churches, mosques, municipal governments, and business organizations, among other kinds of institutions, to embark on the journey of transformation to bring all life systems, human and non-human, back into balance.

Notes

- 1 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/11/516592-pope-francis-calls-strong-climate-agreement-during-visit-un-office-nairobi>, accessed 19 January 2021.
- 2 In October 2018, the IPCC estimated that there was only a 12-year window to take action to avoid catastrophic climate change; see <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/10/1022492>, accessed 19 January 2021.
- 3 See Amartya Sen’s special contribution on ‘Human Development and Mahbubul Haq’ and how their friendship shaped the *Report* (UNDP 2020: xi). See also Gasper (2011).
- 4 See, among others, Fukuda-Parr and Kumar (2009), Prabhu and Iyer (2019), Stewart, Ranis and Samman (2018).
- 5 In her account of the capability approach, Robeyns (2017: 197–202) contends that the two need to be carefully distinguished. She justifies the distinction on the grounds that (1) human development has wider intellectual roots; (2) the capability approach is used for a wide range of purposes beyond mere development concerns; (3) the human development approach implicitly conveys a developing/developed country dichotomy, which the capability approach seeks to supersede; (4) human development is presented as an alternative policy paradigm to neo-liberalism, whilst the capability approach is simply an evaluative framework. This book has however not been concerned with the ‘capability approach’ in the abstract but as a specific approach for thinking about development.

- 6 See UNDP (2020: 241–4) for the comparative table of all countries of their HDI and P-HDI.
- 7 The original quote is from Wildcat (2013: 515).
- 8 For an Islamic perspective on development and care for the earth, see Khan and Cheema (2020).
- 9 See also Sen (2017a: 40) for the role of public reasoning in value change with regard to the environment.
- 10 Sen (2017a: xxix) defines an optimal alternative as one ‘that is at least as good as every other alternative’ and maximal as one ‘which is not worse than any other alternative’. In this case, the decisions to introduce carbon-pricing or regulations are both maximal decisions, as one cannot rank them against each other.
- 11 For a discussion of the neglect of people’s inner worlds in development, see Ives, Freeth and Fischer (2020).
- 12 See Deane-Drummond and Deneulin (2020) for a discussion on integral human development and integral ecology and their differences of emphasis.

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