

2020 International Science Council and UNDP  
Global discussion on rearticulating Human Development.

Think Piece  
Human Development, Local Specificities and Foreign Aid;  
Development in the New Frontier (post-COVID-19)

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A response to the Serageldin piece with further discussion  
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I open this think piece with gratitude to Ismail Serageldin. His work has supported human-centered development and made it the benchmark of development programs around the world. His definition of sustainable development is as follows:

*Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*  
(Serageldin, 2020)

From this definition, one can deduce that *education* fulfills the requisition of sustainable development. Education is human capital that cannot be taken from you and is passed down to generations through economic, social, and childrearing decisions made. Perhaps this is why U.S. Foreign Aid launched a long-term campaign on educating the poor, aside from other reasons regarding national security and spreading democratic values (Lancaster, 2006 and Gendzier, 1985). When we look at USAID's definition of human-centered development, we see a shift towards the humanity of those we aim to help:

*Human-centered design (HCD) is a way of thinking that places the people you're trying to serve and other important stakeholders at the center of the design and implementation process.* (USAID, 2018)

The shift brings pause to the *one-size-fits-all* development model (unauthored-UNESCO, 2013). Education alone does not meet the needs of people who are presently hungry. Education is a long-term gain for those who can afford a roof and daily food while they learn. This brings us to Serageldin's refined definition of sustainable development:

*Sustainability is to leave future generations as many opportunities as, if not more than, we have had ourselves.* (Serageldin, 2020)

I concur with this definition, yet I wish to add that opportunity is a relative term. Opportunity is based on the normative values of a people. One must take into consideration the opportunity someone has living in a developing country, under governance that is fearful of free trade, with little to no foreign direct investment (FDI) or industry to get a job. In terms of local specificities, take Kenya, for example. In Nairobi, over half the population live in informal settlements (Kenya 2019 Census). Slum-dwellers earn \$1.90/day *inconsistently*. President Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya is beginning to embrace trade and FDI, yet it has not happened at the rate of other African countries such as Mauritius. Thus, there are educated Kenyan's who live in the slums and cannot take advantage of opportunities because they do not exist in their country.

According to USAID's Country Roadmaps to Self-Reliance 2020, Kenya's overall capacity for self-reliance is at .04 on a scale where 1.0 is the highest. Kenya's rating for open and accountable governance is 0.38, trade freedom at 0.37, and liberal democracy at 0.32. In comparison, Mauritius is rated 0.44 for open and accountable governance, 0.88 for trade freedom, and 0.78 for liberal democracy with an overall self-reliance rate of 0.75. Mauritius is a country we typically don't think of as much as we do Kenya. How many times have you met a student from Mauritius vs. a student from Kenya? What happened to all that education we invested in through U.S. Foreign Aid to Kenya...the sustainable development meant to offer opportunities to generations to come?

My point is that sustainability and human-centered development must evolve to the reality that we are collective in our endeavors, but they must be developed per specificity of culture, geography, and governance. Americans value man-made wealth, while Indigenous cultures value natural wealth. Africans value social wealth, while Europeans value human wealth overall. Russia, China, Australia, South America, and Southeast Asia fall somewhere in between these values, and rightly so. Variation is an integral part of our homeostasis.

Our conceptual understanding of human development remains disjointed. We (the West) seek to help humans increase their potential through opportunities for greater freedom and wellbeing. Yet, we exclude our own growth in human development, which may very well include re-educating ourselves on how best to evolve towards “real” freedom, deciding who we want to be, what to do, and how to live. Post-COVID, the world is a new frontier in which people and human-centered development must evolve. “We” must become authentic in our vision to improve freedom and wellbeing collectively.

The significant challenge for human-centered development today is the lack of embracing the realities of those we wish to help. Human-centered development requires an intervention. The COVID-19 Pandemic has exacerbated poverty globally, and pre-pandemic projections had already revealed that Africa would not meet the UNSGD of poverty reduction by 2030. There were statistics and forecasts, but no pivot in programming to thwart the growing poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Nevertheless, this think-piece is about solutions and authentic innovation. Tomorrow is already here and will be with us indefinitely, as the pandemic awakens us to a new frontier, one where there will be more pandemics...because, like humans, viruses wish to develop too. The key challenge for policymakers and the public is understanding that we must all coordinate and cooperate to keep living on this planet - *scientists already know this*.

I believe now more than ever that the human development approach can inform public debate about current and future challenges primarily because we are all on our knees physically, financially, and socially. No country has escaped the pandemic. The human development approach provides the framework to discuss who we are, how to keep what we’ve built up, and what we should do to prevent it from being taken away.

The existing blind spot in this approach is the selfishness of sovereign leaders and individuals unable to evolve towards the collectiveness of humankind. The world is interconnected, which means the welfare of its’ citizens are interconnected. Leadership must embrace the goal to have healthy citizens with freedom and real opportunity to thrive - it enables the country to thrive as well. Extreme poverty is so 1990’s. It’s time to evolve. In our changing world, I would define Human Development as the following:

*Human development is founded on the understanding that we are part of a larger ecosystem that requires balance; a balance exhibited in our cultural and geographical differences, our values, and our preferences on how to live. (Pashayan, 2020)*

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