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Building a world community

# mondial

Canadian Edition

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*Published by the World Federalist Movement - Canada, a non-governmental organization that advocates more just and effective global governance through the application of the principles of democratic federalism to world affairs.*

VOL. 4, ISSUE 2  
SPRING 2021

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## The UNDP Human Development Report: Looking back to look ahead

*by Fergus Watt*

Late last year the UN Development Programme released its 30th anniversary Human Development Report. First published in 1990, the annual report sought to enshrine a new way to conceive and measure progress. Instead of using growth in GDP as the primary measure of development, the world's countries were ranked by their human development: by whether people in each country have the freedom and opportunity to live the lives they value.

Over the years these reports have not only compiled statistics, benchmarks and country indicators that track the course of human progress. The report has occasionally risen above the political fray, marshaling independent, empirically grounded perspectives that have shaped innovative thinking on what is understood as “development.”

Some of the notable examples where the Report consolidated leading-edge thinking to further drive UN development system norms and understandings include:

The 1994 Report that focused on “human security,” linking security with the welfare of people rather than territories, and relies on human rights and the rule of law more than arms and the coercive use of force.

The 1995 Report on the required progress in reducing gender disparities, such as female education, equality of opportunities and compensation in the workplace, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and more.

The 1993 and 2002 Reports that focused, respectively on “people’s participation” and on the requirements of providing democracy as an essential element of good governance.

The 2000 Report that had human rights as a central theme. After the Cold War rights could assume a much greater part in development programming. And the 2000 Report also put forward the proposition that human rights and human dignity are essential to a fairer “new era of globalization.”

The 2006 Report that focused on the linkages between poverty and water scarcity worldwide.

The 2007/8 Report that focused on responses to climate change, “the defining human development challenge of the 21st century.”

The 2009 Report that focused on human mobility and development, i.e. growing migration, both within and beyond borders.

The 2019 Report that brought renewed attention to inequalities as a roadblock to human development, their causes and the range of policy responses.

The theme for the Report in 2020 is “The next frontier: Human Development in the Anthropocene.”

“Anthropocene” is a geological term meant to convey that the current age is one in which human activity has become the dominant influence on climate, the environment, indeed most of the earth’s biological systems.

Global warming, biodiversity collapse and oceans pollution and acidification are evidence that we have not adequately dealt with human impacts on the natural world. These impacts interact with existing inequalities, threatening significant development reversals.

The 2020 Report suggests that “Nothing short of a great transformation – in how we live, work and cooperate – is needed.” But alas, one looks in vain for a clear indication of the scale and speed of those required transformations.

At one point it is acknowledged that “At present the global community has no system for measuring the comprehensive wealth of countries—that is, tracking changes to environmental assets alongside human-made assets—so even if we were achieving the sustainability criterion, we would not know. Developing such a system is a major challenge, but it is an essential step towards building global institutions that can account for global environmental changes while balancing the economic interests of current and future generations.”

The 2020 report begins to sketch out the values, priorities and lifestyles – the green economy, etc. – that will need to characterize development in the anthropocene. And there is an effort to develop a new, experimental “Planetary pressures-adjusted Human Development Index.”

But clearly we humans have much more to understand.

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