Rethinking Human Development: a journey with multiple and shifting narratives

This essay by the project Steering Group synthesizes the interviews and commentaries gathered through the ISC-UNDP project on rethinking human development. It presents an initial framing towards a rethinking of human development, through a set of nine interconnected directions drawing on the contributions received.

1. Thirty years ago

The Human Development Report (HDR) has turned 30. Since the release of the first HDR in 1990, the authors of the reports and a broad range of intellectuals and agencies have worked hard to put people at the centre of economic development and to argue that ‘people are the true wealth of nations’. During these three decades, the concept of human development has evolved and matured, influencing academic debate, policy and practice, how development organizations measure their impact and how countries assess their progress. The concept has also created ripple effects in questioning such categories as ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries, Global North and Global South, as the widespread use of the Human Development Index (HDI) enabled us to question the overarching
importance of GDP growth as the single measure of economic development. This opened
the door to the wider and more universal conception and application of development that
emerged in 2015 with the 2030 Agenda, encompassing the ecological, social and economic
dimensions of sustainable development.

The story of these past 30 years is, however, one of uneven development. Substantial
improvements in life expectancy, access to livelihoods and enhanced well-being across
the world coexist with pervasive poverty, disempowerment, unconscionable inequalities,
major environmental degradation and democracy and governance crises. In addition,
development achievements have been driven by fossil-fuelled economies, industrial
agriculture, deforestation and displacement of indigenous populations, creating a climate
emergency, eroding ecosystems or provoking mass extinctions that have already led to
losses in human development achievements. It has also been a story of uneven uptake of
the full meaning of human development as envisioned by its founders, Mahbub ul Haq and
Amartya Sen.

The last three decades have also brought major advances in science and technology,
enabling rapid change along with the emergence of new ideas about the meaning
of human flourishing and the scales that make up the different dimensions of human
development – the individual and the social, cultural, political, environmental and socio-
economic circumstances of individual lives.

It is also clear now that any development approach must consider the life course
of the individual from conception to adulthood and then death, the central role of
intergenerational influences, and the many diverse identities we forge over time. We must
also recognize the immense variation in how these influences are expressed across cultures
and the psychological harm when cultural identity is lost. Socio-political elements, such as
democracy, institutions and social cohesion, and ecological and technical dimensions are
fundamental in providing the enabling environment for our humanity.

New insights on individual development and mental well-being and social and biological
evolutionary perspectives on human health and disease all lead to new understandings
of our own humanity, on how the human brain works and the ways human behaviour may
change. This knowledge leads us to a richer understanding of the characteristics that make
us human and has influenced the rapid emergence of intelligent technologies.

New forms of connectivity and communication are reworking human societies, and the ways
their meanings and values are constituted and expressed, altering configurations of power
and voice. Albeit their many benefits, these technologies have also enabled misinformation and the manipulation of facts, contributing to power imbalances and societal polarization. There is growing evidence that these technologies can have impacts in uneven ways on mental health, on brain development and on social relationships. Yet the push for democracy and people’s empowerment remains unabated if not realized, with inclusive political and economic decision-making remaining elusive for many. Advances in rights and justice, and the ending of discrimination around gender, race, belief or place are piecemeal and often accompanied by pushback. Environmental consciousness has reached the boardrooms of major companies, and the technologies and impetus for renewable energies and a carbon-neutral future are stronger than ever. Yet negative climate and environmental changes continue. Highlighting these profound contradictions, an accelerating number and range of protests around the world – from youth climate strikes to marches against gender and racial injustice – call for change. 2030 will be a critical moment to assess whether the world is on a pathway to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including a sustainable and equitable trajectory to stabilize the climate while meeting the needs of current and future generations.

The 30th anniversary of the Human Development Report thus coincides with a time of both profound challenges and immense opportunities. It is, without doubt, time to review the concept critically. As articulated in the initial project framing piece produced by the project Steering Group, it is a moment to reflect on the evolving landscape and expectations – a landscape that is globalized, technology enabled, and hugely compromised by growing and multiple inequalities, fiscal measures that threaten meeting basic needs, fractured and fracturing societies, and environmental changes – and to provide a conceptual framework to guide analysis, measurement and decision-making to support the achievement of the SDGs.

This discussion paper synthesizes the contributions to this project by a wide variety of actors and articulates a rethinking of our own initial ideas. It does not aim to provide a summary of the rich views we have collected, and we encourage readers to engage with each individual contribution. Rethinking human development cannot be solely a one-off academic exercise. It is a process requiring dialogue, a journey towards new understandings that hears a wide diversity of voices from practitioners and wider publics. What we hope to achieve in this paper are a basis for guiding that process by articulating key directions of thinking, key ideas to inform the development of a common understanding of the notion of human development – and, potentially, a common basis for deciding how to progress and measure it. We are aware that the insights collected through this project represent a limited set of views coming primarily from scientists and researchers, and that the rethinking of
human development must include many other voices. The most fundamental insight that has emerged from the process is that there is no single narrative of human development but rather multiple narratives that shift over time. Like hikers following signposts for directions, we have weaved ideas emerging from our conversations into points of connection providing direction for our journey.

2. Nine interconnected directions for rethinking human development

We propose nine interconnected directions for guiding the process of rethinking human development. These nine aspects address in an interconnected and systems-based way the economic, societal, cultural, institutional, technological, ecological and political dimensions of the proposed journey to rethinking human development. Special care is given to unpacking the characteristics of being human from the psychological, medical and evolutionary biology perspectives, devoting attention to people’s life courses, minds, and bodies, but also to the central role of many different forms of identity and culture, norms, values and beliefs. We know that the framing presented here and the directions we have chosen will change and evolve as the world seeks meaning and direction towards a sustainable future for all. We recognize that these general directions will carry diverse, specific meanings for different people and groups – thus they are anchors for dialogue as much as definitive statements. We hope they serve as a basis for eliciting further insights beyond the challenges of today and illuminate the unforeseen challenges of tomorrow.

2.1. A fresh start for rethinking the meaning of development

We want to start with some reflections on the term development. A recurrent theme across insights received from many participants in the discussion resulting from the ISC-UNDP project on Rethinking Human Development, is that the term development is loaded with history, values, politics and orthodoxies. This, as highlighted by many of the participants on this consultation, prevents creative and disruptive thinking, making it necessary to reform how the term is understood. The term is not only loaded with a history of subjugation of the so-called Global South by the Global North through processes of imperialism, colonialism and their modern guises. It has also become entrenched with ideas and ideologies that obscure important elements, such as the value of people’s inner lives or the role of power relations in perpetuating poverty and vulnerability. These have also spilled over into the Global North, leading to complex relations across and within nations and peoples. Dominant economistic narratives and aggregated metrics associated
with the mainstream concept of development hide important aspects of the experiences and aspirations of individuals and societies and the conditions that enable or hinder our humanity to thrive. These characteristics are often transmitted to the very different idea of human development. Perhaps a first pointer emerging from the insights received is to reflect on the scope of rethinking needed to create space to debate the meaning of human development in the current context, and avoid being caught in the histories of development in the context of development aid.

Several interviewees highlighted how a fresh start for rethinking development requires avoiding the loaded and narrow history of the term and complementing its other meanings, possibly leading to an alternative term free from its historical baggage. Some contributors pointed to seeking alternative histories of the term, emerging from evolutionary biology and social psychology. Others pointed to its distinctive meaning in medicine and the human sciences, where the consideration is one of the passages from conception to birth to childhood to adulthood to old age and death. It is clear that a range of factors can act on the individual, particularly early in the life course, to affect their biological, psychological and behavioural development with long-term consequences for their health, their relationships, and their ability to make economic contributions. But those factors can also be direct, such as trauma or malnutrition – or indirect, and through the family, society, environment and economy. In a sense the individual can be visualized at the centre of an expanding ‘onion ring’ of family, extended family, community, society, nation, region, world – all directly or indirectly affecting the individual. And the factors operating may be human, social, technological or environmental.

Other contributors use of ‘development’ simply reminded us of its connotation as a change process. Anything that may be said to be developing is changing from one state to another. Like the chrysalis that nurtures the monarch butterfly, a process of change can result in something beautiful. But it can also be a bad development, as the term is used in common language to describe, for example, a bad turn of events. In both cases development means change, and that change can be incremental, transformative, linear, complex, positive or negative, entangled with power and producing winners and losers.

In social psychology, development means a change towards some form of maturity – an ontological evolution. When applied together with the noun ‘human’, the history of human development is as long as the millennia of evolution of the human race, changing and evolving, creating and depending on the self-created conditions of human existence.

Development is also about mindsets and beliefs, both the driver and the target of change and evolving views. And it has moral, cultural, spiritual and religious connotations,
captured well by the originators of human development in the context of the UNDP, as the next section describes. It is never value-neutral, but rather underpinned by values and principles to be upheld and to guide and nourish change processes. This sense of spiritual and value-driven advancement, we are reminded by the contributors, has often been associated with the recognition of the other, the decentring of the self and the including of others, including non-human nature and all living beings in our quest for well-being and progress. Ultimately development is about both empathy and altruism – that is having the cooperative sense of caring for all persons and things that are not us but are entangled in our own change processes.

Enriching our view of development with centuries old meanings of change processes in the natural and the social worlds, a long journey filled with differing terrains, can help shake away the problematic connotations of the term, and move towards a more ‘decolonized’ vision. Indeed, narrow, aid-focused connotations have accumulated in a comparably very short period and thus are arguably thus less evolved and less meaningful – though they are wrapped in major global institutions and power relations that can make them hard to shake. Tracking, interrogating and challenging these power relations is an important part of making the space for richer dialogues and new directions.

2.2. Visionary rethinking of our humanity

The original overarching goal of the concept of human development was to put humans at the centre of development and to dethrone the evaluation of people and countries by a single metric meant to measure economic production. The depth of the idea and the true value of the concept was to create a movement based on visionary thinking. Human development was about enlarging human freedoms, enabling people to live the lives they have reasons to value. Most of the definitions of human development from contributors revolve around this idea, perhaps expressed with different words, many focused on defining parameters for our well-being, by pointing out that our well-being must be responsible to others or cognizant of planetary boundaries. But at the core, the ultimate meaning of human development is freedom: development as freedom was the original meaning of human development 30 years ago.

We express this original meaning of human development in the past tense to convey that it may have simply been lost. Many contributors point out the need not only to revitalize the original human focus of the HDRs and the visionary intellectual traditions from which the concept of human development emerged in the late 1980s – but also to deepen such
human centredness and ensure that it is properly translated into policy and decision-making rather than being exclusively seen as simplified and aggregated into measures or targets.

Keeping this vision alive and its rich intellectual underpinnings, matured over time by the capability approach’s theorists, is a major element in our journey of rethinking human development.

However, our changing world also demands expanding the rethinking of development to rethinking our humanity. We must move beyond the aspiration to dethrone thinking of economic production as well-being to a deep dive into the conditions that make us humans. We do that by enriching the concept of human development with everything we have learned in the past decades about our biology and psychology, the inner lives of human beings, the sources of our resilience, the way the brain or emotions affect our sense of self-worth, the way social relations with family, friends and others create (or destruct) our humanness and how solidarity makes us better and happier.

It is also fundamental to recognize how our humanity is co-defined through our interconnections with non-human nature and our place in the universe organically embracing the natural environment. In our conversations we have repeatedly heard that rethinking our humanity includes recognizing the connectedness, for our individual and collective well-being, with the natural environment and all living things surrounding us, the planet, the universe. Connectedness to one another across societies in multicultural settings, and the connectedness created by transnational webs leading to a global community of humans are fundamental elements of human development in the 21st century.

Rethinking our humanity from this relational perspective also has operational dimensions. Relationality was a key element already pointed out by our initial framing. Without a more relational conception of the individual or without social and indeed socio-ecological cohesion, we cannot solve the problems that threaten us. Humans evolved as social animals dependent on cooperation within the individual’s identified group. Rules, beliefs, mores and customs evolved to sustain this cooperation. Our resilience depends on the resilience of others, and healthy individuals and societies depend on healthy ecologies and a healthy planet. This means that rethinking our development journey is about making it less individually human-centred, more relational and more system-centred. The individual self – the mind, body and spirit – is a fundamental element of any healthy society, but our nature as social beings means we must avoid the pitfalls of exclusive individualism.

This rethinking of our humanity directs our journey to develop further our notion of what it is to be human in a time of a looming climate catastrophe, but also a time when technology
may undermine our humanity affecting our autonomy and agency. Technology is already having an impact in many societies on how individuals behave, how they form their emotional relationships and social networks, how they work, and how they understand the world and form their opinions and actions – and it is subject to much manipulation.

Technology has expanded our connectedness. But in doing so, some physical relationships are replaced with virtual connectedness in ways that affect people’s perceptions of the world. In this changing world, there are more and more confused identities, and a massive decrease in mental well-being. That is a function of the confused identities that we have now, and that we did not have in more simple and physically connected communities.

Studies of the global burden of disease highlight the growing importance of mental well-being and the rapid rise of mental illness in all societies. Mental well-being and human development are closely linked. Mental well-being is something more than simply the absence of a diagnosable mental illness. It is a state where one’s thought and emotional processes allow one to meet one’s optimal potential. Many factors play into the increasing prevalence of a loss of mental well-being, including loss of social cohesion, loss of trust in societal institutions, demographic and economic change, conflict, shifting expectations in a very complex world, rapid change and the emergence of the digital environment.

Medical and psychological research is showing the importance of a life course approach to understanding the emergence of psychological resilience in the face of rapid change. Such resilience is critical to sustained mental well-being. The foundations emerge in the first few years of life and are reinforced in the school years. While much is known of what conditions are most likely to assist its development, these remain sadly deficient for many children. If people do not have psychological resilience, mental well-being and a sense of self-worth, then human development is not being achieved for them.

Are we really protecting our humanity when models of development and conceptions of progress destroy the sustenance of our lives, the natural environment we depend on, or other living beings? Does the widespread use of technologies, especially digital technologies, risk transforming our personalities and transforming the way we relate to one another into distant, controlled and technology-mediated relations? Are we leveraging all the potential positive ways we can use technologies to enhance our freedoms and capabilities in an open, transparent and safe environment? On the one hand, we need to change behaviour. On the other, we need to reassert a human logic upon the potentially increasingly dominant logic of machines. The logic of artificial intelligence or big data is a logic of quantification that may further deepen the aggregation, quantification and
datafication that for many has drowned the concept of human development into a single metric, such as the HDI. A technology-facilitated humanity may throw away all those traits that are not quantifiable such as human emotion, feelings, mindsets, religious principles or ethical values. We need all of those traits to reassert our humanity and recognize the humanity of others.

2.3. Strengthening institutions and accountability

The inner dimensions of human development have always been a core characteristic, and for many they should form the kernel of the concept, but we should avoid confusing the importance of the internal dimensions of our humanity with their policing. It was highlighted by a few contributors that to be effective and implementable in policy frameworks, the journey into rethinking human development must avoid the categorical mistake of implying that the inner dimensions of human beings are of public scope.

As clearly elaborated by the work of Amartya Sen and perhaps much more clearly in the work of Martha Nussbaum, the task of institutions is to craft the social structures that facilitate the expansion of people’s capabilities. Institutions are needed to provide accountability for ensuring the conditions that enable people’s lives to flourish. Tackling fragilities and tapping potentialities in human nature can only be fully appreciated from an ethical perspective. Institutions and accountability mechanisms ought to uphold and facilitate humanity’s struggles for autonomy, agency, self-consciousness, empathy, cooperation and solidarity. This is the true sense of development as freedom.

Institutions and accountability are also central for operationalizing human development as freedom, for promoting the common good, solving complex global challenges, protecting and defending the vulnerable and giving voice to the marginalized and discriminated as well as to the rights of future generations. Institutions must work for humanity. But the world may also need new ones to protect all those non-human elements that make humanity possible – functioning socio-ecological systems including climate and biodiversity – and to address the challenges of rapid technological change. Moreover, the measures needed to adapt to unavoidable climate change impacts and to roll out the needed mitigation strategies to prevent catastrophic tipping points would be possible only with accountable institutions that create the needed incentives. These incentives require international, transnational and global institutions that take the world towards collective action, countering aggressive nationalism and revitalizing multilateralism, and ensuring that global responsibilities are assumed in addressing global challenges.
What we do or fail to do now has irreversible consequences for future generations. After all, no vision of humanity is possible unless it is balanced with the planetary life support processes that underpin human capabilities and flourishing. There is a need for institutions that support three major moral and organizational revolutions: the responsibility to stabilize the climate and restore the health of the planet; global justice to ensure a fair transition that leaves no one behind; and shifts in mental maps and normative frameworks that guide us to the moral imperative encapsulated in human development.

2.4. Human development is possible only within planetary boundaries

Development as freedom is impossible without considering our planetary life support systems, now often conceptualized as planetary boundaries. This message was repeated in diverse formulations by most contributors. There were the many obvious pointers to why current ideas of progress and development threaten the stability of the planet and thus our own well-being. The pervasive dominance of a logic of extraction, consumerism, materialistic conceptions of the good life and the discounting of the future common to several economic approaches appear to be the most fundamental reasons. The exclusive logic of the market in production, consumption and finance not only creates disincentives for alternatives to flourish, it also prevents the appropriate accounting and measurement of the real costs of production and consumption and hides the costs of social and environmental needs. Environmental damage and social care remain outside business decisions.

Several criticisms of the shortcomings of the current HDI relate to its inability to measure the ecological impact of the production and consumption of goods and services, and of the policies and behaviours that harm our planet. In failing to account for ecological damages, the HDI does not directly account for these costs, creating blind spots as if human development could be decoupled from the natural environment. It is the same logic that hides the value and the cost of social care. In balancing human development with planetary boundaries, advanced economies bear unique historical and ethical responsibilities.

We face a dilemma. On the one hand, the material and non-material value of non-human nature and ecologies is at the core of alternative views of progress and development associated with several indigenous knowledge systems and traditional lifestyles, which often are lifestyles that are ecologically balanced. On the other hand, while many environmental movements emerge from vulnerable populations, the concerns are often depicted as being of those who already have their human needs covered, the concerns of accommodated and educated elites. We must keep human needs at the centre of human development but
integrate the needs of ecological systems and planetary life support processes. We can no longer consider human needs and the natural environment as different issues.

The tendency to pit economic development against the environment has led the world to a dead end. It is time to interweave them, just as our humanity is interwoven with the health of non-human nature and ultimately the planet. Responsible well-being demands being cognizant of the implications of consumption, accountability, and ways to factor in the interests of future generations. Responsible well-being for people and planet is about internalizing environmental and social costs in the true value of goods and services. It is about conceptualizing the systems underpinning humanity as socio-ecological or socio-natural systems, and development as positive change in those systems.

This also underlines the importance of a universal conception of development that extends to all societies. The object of studying development has often been the Global South, or sometimes poor sections of high-income countries. If we wish to celebrate another 30 years of human development, our attention must be extended to all societies and the behaviour of citizens who have already achieved high levels of human development under traditional measures. Human development can no longer be about becoming like the high-income countries in GDP growth and in health and education achievements.

This is the real challenge. Rethinking human development requires facing head on the huge difficulties, but also opportunities, that high-income, older-industrialized economies have in becoming more sustainable – by changing their extractive economies and tackling tax avoidance and environmentally destructive cultures. Rolling away from high environmental impact path dependencies and reducing emissions to be in line with the Paris Agreement, biodiversity goals, and with all the SDGs is the real challenge for the sustainability of human development. A further pointer in our multiple journeys is that these path dependencies are created and reinforced by a lack of social cohesion and gross inequalities, perpetuated by entrenched power dynamics.

2.5. Mitigation of inequality and promotion of social cohesion are enablers – not merely prerequisites – for human development

Without a doubt, our journeys must give a central role to a challenge highlighted by almost all contributors. Current levels of inequality and the lack of social cohesion within and across countries are a major challenge for operationalizing the concept of human development and for implementing the needed measures. The absence of social cohesion – understood as not only solidarity but preventing marginalization, discrimination, racism,
xenophobia and high levels of inequality – hinders operationalizing a more humane, more environmentally conscious and responsible version of human progress that emerges from the first pointers in our journey (elaborated in previous sections). Misinformation and disinformation empowered by technology can enhance polarization and undermine cohesion. Gross inequalities in wealth, power, voice and representation discourage open debate on the meaning of progress and development, pollute institutions, prevent accountability and generate self-justifying narratives for the never-ending logic of extraction and exploitation of people and planet. Rethinking human development requires that addressing inequalities is brought centre stage, recognizing multiple inequalities – not only economic but also social, cultural, political, spatial, environmental and knowledge – and how they intersect with each other.

Many contributors pointed to how inequalities prevent the interests of ordinary people and the common good, including those of future generations, being given the weight they deserve. The lack of social cohesion inhibits stepping beyond the individual self and embracing the happiness, joys and fears, or the sufferings of others. For those who understand development as freedom to be about love, inequalities make us all, in effect, unloving beings, also unable to value the health of the planet that sustains us. We cannot achieve the needed consensus to account for the true value of the well-being of the planet when societies are fragmented, when the social fabric is torn apart and when social connections are broken by greed, envy, fear, distrust and anger.

A key problem is that the narratives of justifications for inequalities, marginalization and discrimination involve financial and economic power, and in many cases corruption and violence. They then become tools in themselves to manipulate public debates, budget allocations and service provisions to sustain and perpetuate current inequalities. The concentration of economic, political and social power in the hands of a few sustains and legitimizes inequalities, since the powerful elites and patriarchal powers have little incentive to challenge the status quo. The failure of solidarity translates into a failure to make the necessary social arrangements for human development priorities.

Instead, we want inequalities to be reduced and social cohesion to be nurtured and enabled. Without both, human development is not really possible. Many of the insights we received on rethinking human development have pointed to the health and socio-economic crises of the COVID-19 pandemic as having laid bare inequalities; it affects everyone but not at all equally. The pandemic also offers a clear example of the interlinkages between inequalities and the absence of social and individual resilience.
Why do we know this is an important role for a strong and cohesive society? Precisely because the world offers many examples where communities unite to work together to solve problems and improve livelihoods, support the weak and vulnerable and organize from bottom up to fill the gap left by policy failures and individualism of the market. Indeed, many community and neighbourhood groups have done so for COVID-19. We know that equity and social cohesion are prerequisites for human development because the fight against marginalization and discrimination is unifying. And when multilateralism is well articulated, it creates the basis for collaboration and cooperation. Businesses and investors know that, in a complex and interconnected world, equitable transactions and collaborations are good for long-term sustainability. From happier workers to better educated peers and equal trading partners, healthy societies are those where equality of opportunity exists, where solidarity thrives, where social cohesion overcomes difficult trade-offs and choices.

Any reconceptualization of human development that addresses cohesion across society, relations between countries or across generations, or relations with non-human nature and ecologies is threatened by a grossly unequal world and the narratives and processes that perpetuate such inequalities. Enhancing social cohesion, mitigating inequalities and restoring the value of social relations is a journey that requires the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives. It requires that we attend seriously to the structural conditions and violence creating and perpetuating inequalities – and that the experiences and priorities of those most marginalized are heard and included.

Rethinking human development must thus be an open journey for all, beyond governments and agencies, beyond experts and academics. This leads to the imperative for democratic deliberation.

2.6. Democratic deliberation is needed for resilient socio-ecological systems

Precisely because we frame our journey as acknowledging and appreciating multiple and shifting narratives, rethinking human development needs to be an open-ended and multidimensional process towards new social contracts based on renewed human development thinking. Many contributors have pointed to the importance of envisioning this journey not as a task for experts alone, even if the range of expertise brought to the table is much broader than has traditionally been the case. Citizens, including those living in conditions of vulnerability, marginalization and poverty in all countries, must be consulted and must have the opportunity to participate. The journey must reflect the voices of young people from across the planet, as visions of the good life have changed substantively. Although we know cities have been hubs of attraction and the destination chosen by many
in the past as means to enhance their human flourishing, the young or future generations may soon have other types of aspirations, options opened by technology, options where place becomes less meaningful. Maybe, just maybe, the good life may become about making other planets habitable. Maybe the good life is about upholding indigenous traditions and culture as the ticket to trade for a better and more meaningful life. Progress can be about living more closely with nature and with one another.

Defining meaning, value and life satisfaction once basic needs are met is difficult, as this is a vast terrain full of diverse choices. The truth is we do not know whose good life is better than our own, whoever ‘we’ may be. That knowledge is not a certainty we need for rethinking the meaning of human development. What is needed in this journey is to listen to all voices, to acknowledge our own values and positions with humility, and equally important, to prevent dominant definitions or views from framing or setting the terms of the debate or, worse still, from closing the debate. If development is freedom, democratic deliberation (local, national and transnational) is the channel to get us there. This does not always and necessarily mean ‘democracy’ as defined according to particular formal representative institutions and practices, or political and historical traditions. While some lament a crisis of democracy in the conventional Western liberal sense, there are also many informal, participatory democratic processes emerging across the world, where citizens are claiming inclusion in the decisions that affect their lives.

Listening to all voices is key also for the eventual effectiveness of specific policies and measures. As highlighted by many contributors, human development happens not by observing but by participating. Buy-in, uptake, trust in government, overcoming the doubts and fears of the other – all are possible when people feel part of the journey, not the objects for whom a journey is predefined. This listening can be done with available participatory methodologies which have advanced substantively since the landmark Voices of the Poor report was published by the World Bank more than 25 years ago. Digital technologies open new possibilities for engaging with people. They provide platforms for new coalitions to emerge, and for more impactful results to spread quickly across the world.

There is a deeper meaning for the role of deliberative democracy going forward. Democratic deliberation is also crucial to prevent the further undermining of people’s freedom by authoritarianism. Democratic societies require individuals to have free will and autonomy, values and rights that take precedence. Authoritarianism of all kinds threatens the non-negotiable basic human rights of all. Misinformation and disinformation, both of which are made much easier in a technological world, also impede and undermine deliberative democratic processes.
Some parts of the world are already suffering violent and brutal authoritarianism. In other parts, narrow economic interests and the concentration of economic and political power drive forms of authoritarianism, tearing apart the social fabric of countries, often fuelled by racism and hate. Many may have thought that Western democracies were stable and relatively resilient against authoritarianism and nationalism, which today threaten former liberal, welfare state-oriented societies, even in Northern Europe. We need to better understand the drivers of this new wave of authoritarianism and nationalism to develop pathways into a more sustainable future.

Here we clearly see how digital technologies are double-edged swords that can be thrust to make the world worse rather than better. Understanding and responding to the powerful opportunities and challenges that the digital revolution poses to both science and society is imperative, especially in an age of disruption and disinformation.

Moreover, the broad rethinking of our humanity by and for all members of humanity in legitimate democratic processes is the key for generating the consensus and the institutions capable of doing the very difficult work of moving the planet towards a stable socio-ecological system. Measures for a resilient socio-ecological future and for positive socio-ecological transformations that assure human development can be envisioned and successfully implemented only with a broad and legitimate consensus enabled by well-functioning democratic institutions and practices at all scales. The connectedness between people and planet and between societies – and the growing importance of many other global interdependencies that have emerged in the past three decades – require cultures of global cooperation and global governance structures enabling transnational democratic deliberation.

2.7. Making the digital age work for human development

Democratizing digital technologies to innovate for public purposes and to serve our humanity is a requirement for human development. The dominance of a few private companies in the digital sphere, driven by competitive short-term market gains, continues in a governance vacuum, in the absence of appropriate public and private regulation. These companies own methods and tools, are able to afford high-performance computing, own data storage facilities and can buy the talent. Moreover, this handful of private companies, through our naive use of the web including social media, own profiles of our current and future behaviour. Big data has become the new oil. And like fossil fuels, it has led to great advances and great harm, and like fossil fuels, there is a need to address these matters in a way that transcends national boundaries.
The threat of automation to middle- and low-skill tasks is already a reality. Tasks undertaken by administrators, lawyers, accountants or salesmen are as threatened as those of factory or farm workers. In earlier periods of technological transformation, the pace of change was unevenly followed by governance and regulatory adjustments. Today, technology innovation is way ahead of governance innovation. Many contributors to rethinking human development pointed out how many countries already face the challenge of having a large number of educated young people unable to find their place in society. Increasing numbers of individuals are redundant to a global economy fuelled by a skewed notion of value that accounts only for profits and not the well-being of people and planet. Uncontrolled deployment of digital technologies by a few large corporations with assets larger than entire countries risks making millions of people redundant and subjugated in new ways. Not only do these technologies have a huge impact on the powers of governments, giving them an unprecedented potential for surveillance and control, they also fuel the increased social polarization and the promotion of false news to undermine science and to increase consumerism. On the other hand, digital technologies offer unique capabilities to move the world in the opposite direction: better democracy, transnational cooperation, improved climate protection, better evidence for decision-making, or more collective intelligence among others. Digital technologies need to be regulated, legislated and subjugated to human rights and to ethical principles, with their owners and users made accountable, their potential harnessed for the common good. This is the challenge – to harness innovation and use technologies to serve human development.

The unprecedented transparency provided by digital technologies can lead us to understand complex supply chains and to a full accounting of the social and environmental costs of products and services. Digital technologies can be used, not for surveillance and control, but to nudge and reward solidarity and environmentally sustainable behaviour. We can measure the energy and water we consume. We can deploy robotics and use machine learning to optimize agricultural production and minimize pollution and the depletion of soils. The huge amounts of data we already have can be a source of value to reinvent communities and to ensure that benefits are shared. When appropriately regulated, digital technologies can lead to new job opportunities, new sources of value, and new conditions for enhanced well-being.

However, we need to work towards fair and sustainable value chains for the components of technologies. And we need to address the huge technical and knowledge gaps. For many, even access to the internet is a challenge, and digital technologies and the capabilities to
create, use and deploy them are still limited. But investments and innovation driven by a new conception of value can put technologies to work for human development.

2.8. Value: a new narrative

At the heart of human development are a core set of contextually moulded values, basic ethical principles that prompt and direct the journey. The originators of the idea of human development knew well the key role of contextually accepted ethics and values in processes of change. Human development has always been a normative concept. The normative core remains: in whatever formulation we have received from the contributors – the capabilities approach, development as freedom, physical and mental well-being, basic human needs or others – there is an ethical core, an embedded notion of value underpinning their conception of human development. Values are also central to moving beyond the individual self to the needs of the collective and the necessity to value the future and the natural environment and other living beings. Social cohesion and the culture of cooperation and joint problem-solving emerge from shared values.

When GDP growth and macroeconomic stability are considered the key signposts of development, they are often presented as value-free concepts, desirable because of their efficiency in bringing about other positive outcomes. Yet GDP is used as a proxy for anything valuable while being presented as a measurement devoid of any normative context. This contradiction is a true sleight of hand. In fact, many contributors claimed that our economies and public policy solutions are skewed against human development precisely because of the way we tend to understand ‘value’, giving GDP growth a central role, discounting the future and any social and environmental harm. This misguided view of value, which considers activities harmful to people and to the environment as creating value, also fails to account for the true value of social services, social protection mechanisms or public goods.

From a business perspective, the failure to price social and environmental destruction prevents sustainability from being profitable. In addition, it leads to a narrowly defined perspective on innovation, one that values only market driven innovation leading to private profit while discarding public and social innovation. This skewed view of value is made even more powerful by the use of digital tools that enable the datafication of everything. The aggregation, quantification and datafication of all aspects of human life hide the true value of human well-being, and of the public goods and public services that nurture well-being, and the value for future generations. This skewed view also hides our inner dimensions,
our psychology and emotions, and the suffering of the poor and marginalized. It ranks the
cognitive values of efficiency and effectiveness above the ethical values of justice, fairness
and equity.

A journey of multiple and shifting narratives requires new meanings, and carefully
negotiated discourse on what is or is not valuable. This does not mean we all need to
agree on a single ethic, and nor does it eliminate diversity and plurality – the recognition
of development as freedom to pursue lives that people have reason to value, whoever
they are, appreciating that these might differ. Yet above diverse, positioned and located
values must be the recognition of our shared humanity, our shared goals and our shared
ownership of the elements that enable our humanity to flourish. This recognition of the
normative core of human development is also about the humility that emerges from looking
at the stars and the world around us. It is also about the pride that emerges from seeking a
better future guided by solidarity.

A new narrative for value is possible thanks to huge advances in science and technology,
which make the scalability of innovative ways to meet our basic needs within planetary
boundaries not only more possible, but also cheaper than 30 years ago. We just need to
put technology to work for the common good, and we need the science underpinning it.

2.9. The role of scientific knowledge

Science, in relation to human development, must be conceptualized broadly to include not
just natural, health and technical sciences, but also knowledge from the social sciences, arts
and humanities. To make a renewed global development project work, we need to learn
to readjust and rebalance the interactions between the three major systems that shape our
civilization: human systems, the earth system, and technological and infrastructure systems.
Science is not well prepared. We still cooperate far too little between the natural and
the social sciences, between the humanities and the medical sciences, and none of those
sciences interact properly with the fields of technology and engineering. To make the gap
more complex, institutional barriers and the different logics of public and private research
and innovation become barriers to progressing in such badly needed dialogue.

The dialogue is also broader than among the traditional sciences and fields of knowledge
taught in universities. Rethinking human development must include respect for indigenous
and tacit knowledge, for the importance of practical or non-technical knowledge and
experience, and respect for the relevance of knowledge outside scientific organizations
(from civil society, communities, workers, farmers or local and indigenous groups). Finding
the right balance and means to embrace and include a whole variety of knowledges, in plural, remains a priority in the journey to rethink human development. After all, framing multiple and shifting narratives about human development requires cognitive flexibility.

The opportunities are there. Robotics, sensors, the ‘internet of things’, global interconnectivity, high-performance computing, and advances in software and artificial intelligence methods provide us with a knowledge base of huge potential. We already have an abundance of data about the earth and social systems and the tools to integrate this data for unique insights about the present and the future. We can simulate the functioning of the climate system and have already created a digital twin of the human heart; we can even try to simulate potential human development pathways. But these fields need to mature and advance taking their social and human dimensions into consideration, and data scientists must work in teams with philosophers and sociologists. Without these scientific perspectives, we cannot understand the drivers of a healthy planet or the ways to stop an epidemic.

We also must put order in the large amounts of data the world already has, ensure access to such data, identify the gaps, and use data in accord with the values that direct human development. There may be large amounts of data about human behaviour, but too often this information is owned by a few private actors, which are already investing in behaviour futures, as a stock market currency. Clearly this abundance of data is fuel for collective intelligence if put to work for the public good. Our journey can be enlightened and can be better directed if we are able to protect the independence of science, create effective science advice systems, and ensure that science is a public good and that data becomes a common resource.

But as with any other normative goal, discovering the meaning of human development needs us to be humble in the face of choices that are the territory of neither science nor politics. Our journey must respect the privacy of our inner lives as much as it creates the enabling conditions for our self-sufficiency. Scientific knowledge also needs to recognize the critical insights from actors outside academia, the practical knowledge accumulated by industry or by communities of action such as those emerging from transforming agricultural practices to adapt to new climate realities. All these different sources of knowledge, methods, tools and engineering achievements are, however, often disconnected, like ships passing in the night. Interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are central, yet they remain elusive.

Making sure our journey is science driven requires more and better science. It requires bridging the huge knowledge divides and knowledge inequalities that still characterize the world. We need to invest first and foremost in the most important source of a country’s wealth, its people.
A fresh start for rethinking the meaning of development

Visionary rethinking of our humanity

Strengthening institutions and accountability

Human development is possible only within planetary boundaries

Redressing inequality and promoting social cohesion are not only prerequisites for but also enablers of human development

Democratic deliberation is needed for resilient socio-ecological systems

Making the digital age work for human development

Value: A new narrative

The role of scientific knowledge
3. Concluding remarks

In this framing text, the term journey conveys how this project has listened to some voices in their own rethinking of human development. We have also characterized one of the most important findings as a journey in itself. Rethinking human development needs to be an open-ended, inclusive journey of seeking multiple and shifting narratives. But for us, this journey of exploration and discovery does not end now.

This phase of the ISC-UNDP project has kicked off a very rich discussion that will continue through various platforms. Future activities under this ongoing partnership will aim to elicit additional narratives and perspectives, installing processes for a continued open and inclusive dialogue and exploring the future of human development measurements based on the conceptual learnings gleaned from this discussion.