

Measuring Difference?

The United Nations' shift from Progress to Poverty

Maria Bach, The American University of Paris (mbach@aup.edu)

Mary S. Morgan, London School of Economics (M.Morgan@lse.ac.uk)

Abstract

This paper examines how the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) redefined their idea of development over the two decades from 1990, no longer presenting it as only a matter of economic progress but instead focusing more on the problem of poverty and its reduction. This change of definition was closely associated with changes in the preferred measurement of development, from average income (based on national income accounting) to the proportion of the population holding certain characteristics of what it meant to live in poverty (instantiated in various index number formulations). Measurements of development thus became direct measures of socio-economic difference, not just between nations, but also within nations. This change was designed to create numbers that would be effective in capturing and communicating those differences in ways usable for both policy and public purposes. Those numbers also provided, in the public and political domains, a resource for fighting for poverty reduction - though the UNDP had few powers to hold governments to account.

1. Introduction

The late 20th century saw positive rates of growth in some regions alongside worsening economic conditions in other parts of the world. The international community were forced to confront the reality that economic growth might not always be good for the poor, and international institutions started to shift their focus from a narrow sense of economic development both towards poverty in terms of inequality and towards a broader sense of what it meant to be poor. This shift happened to varying degrees, in different ways, and is captured here in this paper at three different moments. We have chosen to analyze the historical shift over the last three decades by the United Nations Development

Program (UNDP) as it changed its notion of ‘development’ in ways that focused on inequalities not on averages. The domain is quite complex: it is clear that there was no simple linear history about the way these changes were conceptualized nor in the new measuring instruments that were constructed alongside this reconceptualization of what development meant. It is evident too that this was a general re-thinking of the notion in the main international organizations concerned, not just the UNDP, but also the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). There were multiple projects on poverty reduction, by multiple agencies (including non-governmental organizations) following their own paths, sometimes in parallel, sometimes intersecting and sometimes joining up.

Our particular focus for investigation is on how the UNDP shifted their understanding of development in terms of progress and human development to concentrating on those people denied development or in poverty. This is evident in the way that they turned their attention from measuring development with the Human Development Index to focusing on poverty in the Human Poverty Index and Multidimensional Poverty Index. Here we are interested not only in the way that inequality was measured, but also in the assessment of inequality that went along with these measurements, and the ways in which choosing these particular measurement structures opened up the use of the measured numbers to a range of uses and users.¹

We first look at how the UNDP re-defined development (see section 2). UNDP’s shift towards a greater focus on defining and measuring poverty fit into a wider move by the Washington institutions. The 1980s experienced rising inequality and worsening development in some parts of the world, e.g. Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America, which forced international organizations to question why poverty persisted and how to eradicate it. In section 3, we trace the ways in which those changing notions of development were instantiated in new ways of measuring development. On the one hand, those who chose the categories for measurement embedded their own norms and ideas into these definitional choices. On the other hand, the categories had to be measurable and operable for a wide range of countries and therefore practicable. The counting regime has a two-fold power base: it was built into choices of measuring instruments because new notions of

¹ As we concluded in a recent paper on measuring development, the UNDP has been, and continues to be, involved in a massive program of development ‘accounting’, and so created a system of audit and accountability (Morgan and Bach, 2018; see also section 4 here).

development required different kinds of poverty index numbers, but it was largely operated by those who made those choices (for example to privilege poverty reduction over growth and fiscal rectitude). Section 4 considers the broader process going on here. Counting things is associated in the socio-economic public domain with accountability: i.e. holding those organizations, people or states to account for the ‘realities’ reflected in those numbers. Here the process of holding to account involved the UNDP checking what had been achieved on the basis of these numbers.

2. From Narratives of Progress to Narratives of Poverty

During the 1960s and 1970s, by and large, the international development agenda was progressive and interventionist, but this changed during the 1980s when marketization, neo-liberalism and austerity became more common. When the dust had settled, the consequences were reflected in the form of decreasing per capita income, and increasing poverty and inequality in the IMF loan-recipient countries. Decreasing expenditure on social policies had led to reduced education enrolment and slowed the reduction of infant mortality rates in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa (Cornia, 2016; Cornia et al., 1987; Woodward, 1992). By the end of the decade, the market economic model was being widely criticized (Stewart, 2017, p.15). That experience of the 1980s – often referred to as the ‘lost decade’ – spawned a new focus on development re-framed in terms of human-oriented development, launched with the UNDP’s first *Human Development Report* in 1990 and conceptualized through Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach.²

In broad strokes, since the ‘lost decade’ of the 1980s, there has been a shift first from economic growth targets to human development and from that to poverty reduction. While the 1990 *Human Development Report* argued for focusing on all people because they “are the real wealth of the nation” (UNDP, 1990, p.9), the 1997 *Human Development Report* shifted the aim of human development to “eradicate poverty” (UNDP, 1997, p.2). The next step was marked in the 2010 *Human Development Report*, which focused on the dimensions of poverty and uneven distributed periods of progress and regress (UNDP, 2010, p.1). These three moments of change can be seen in the

² This intellectual connection is widely known, but Sen was already linked to the UN’s work: he served as an advisor and consultant to the Secretary-General and many parts of the UN system, including the International Labor Organization, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, United Nations Children Fund, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, World Food Program, United Nations Development Fund for Women, World Institute for Development Economics Research, and then, extensively, the UNDP. 3

Human Development Reports of 1990, 1997 and 2010, in the literature of the period and later, and in the UN Intellectual History Project.³

The initial moment of change is marked in UNDP's first *Human Development Report*, which reported the institution's change of focus from fostering income growth to fostering human development (UNDP, 1990, p.9). As the 2010 *Human Development Report* narrates its own history, "the 1990 *Human Development Report* was launched following a period of deep economic and debt crises, when policy thinking was dominated by notions of stabilization and adjustment" (UNDP, 2010, p.15). The 1990 report wanted to exchange those notions to: "Human development is a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical ones are to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living" (UNDP, 1990, p.10). The idea was to implement an enabling strategy that would help people to experience higher levels of well-being. And enlarging people's choices could be done not only through increasing aggregate levels of income, but through better health and more education (UNDP, 1990, p.10). In sum, the focus was on all people's choices and their associated level of well-being.

At the second moment of change, the UNDP's 1997 *Human Development Report* shifted the focus from human development in general and for all, to concentrate on how poor people were denied development. In the report, human development was explicitly redefined as poverty reduction or eradication:

The contrast between human development and human poverty reflects two different ways of evaluating development. One way, the "conglomerative perspective," focuses on the advances made by all groups in each community, from the rich to the poor. This contrasts with an alternative viewpoint, the "deprivational perspective," in which development is judged by the way the poor and the deprived fare in each community. Lack of progress in reducing the disadvantages of the deprived cannot be washed away by large advances – no matter how large – by the better-off people (UNDP, 1997, p.15).

UNDP's new purpose was founded on: "Human development to eradicate poverty" – the title of the overview chapter in the 1997 report (UNDP, 1997, p.2).

³ The UN Intellectual History Project, established in 1999, was set up as an independent initiative by the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies of the City University of New York and consisted of a set of edited books written by people close to the UN, and 76 oral history interviews of UN officials that have been transcribed. The edited books include Jolly et al (2004), Jolly et al (2009) and Ward (2004), which offered useful background and details for this paper.

Our third moment focuses on the 2010 *Human Development Report*, which created a broader focus on the have-nots, narrated by Sen in the introduction:

The world has moved on since 1990. There have been many gains (in literacy for example), but the human development approach is motivationally committed to concentrating on what remains undone – what demands most attention in the contemporary world – from poverty and deprivation to inequality and insecurity (UNDP, 2010, p.vi).

The report reflects a shift towards concentrating on poverty. UNDP's earlier focus on evaluating, measuring and defining people who were prospering, or how the average person was better off, seems to be under critique in the 2010 report. As noted in the report's foreword, "the new [Human Development Index] had its shortcomings, as the Report's authors forthrightly acknowledged, including a reliance on national averages, which concealed skewed distribution" (UNDP, 2010, p.iv). The 2010 report's outline also reflected the new focus: there was one chapter on the advances of people followed by 3 chapters that examined "Economic growth and human development do not always coincide," "Good things don't always come together" and the three new measures on multidimensional poverty and inequality (UNDP, 2010, p.xi-xii). The old agenda is not completely overhauled, but examples of developmental failures are prioritized to a greater extent in this third moment.

Expanding the focus from the narrow aggregate perspectives to those comparing positive and negative to a greater focus on the negative is epitomized if we look at the use of, and then a lack of, a "balance sheet of human development" (UNDP, 1990, p.27). The 1990 *Human Development Report* dedicated a whole page to a list of "human progress" on the left or asset side, and instances of "human deprivation" on the right or liabilities side of the balance sheet of human development (UNDP, 1990, p.27). The lists were categorized into life expectancy, education, income, health, children's health, food and nutrition, sanitation and women. For instance, in the human progress (asset) column, under the category of "income," it claimed that the "average per capita income in development countries increased by nearly 3% a year between 1965 and 1980," while under the human deprivation (liabilities) side of the balance sheet, it noted "more than a billion people still live in absolute poverty" (UNDP, 1990, p.27). Another example shows how the asset side listed advances and averages, whereas the liabilities side listed the have-nots and inequality measures. Under the heading "Food and nutrition," the "human progress" side stated that "the per capita average calorie supply increased by

20% between 1965 and 1985,” while the “human deprivation” side noted that “150 million children under (one in every three) suffer from malnutrition” (UNDP, 1990, p.27). The UNDP was setting the average advances against persisting (or sometimes rising) inequalities.

In the 1997 *Human Development Report* an explicit balance sheet was missing, but instead, the report listed numbers that summarized “the balance sheet of poverty,” including only head counts of human poverty (UNDP, 1997, p.3). The report actively sought to steer away from discussing “winners” from development, and concentrated entirely on the “losers” (UNDP, 1997, p.82). The 2010 *Human Development Report* was more nuanced – there was a chapter on the “advances of people” (UNDP, 2010, pp.25–44), although each section included a discussion on instances of poverty, lack of education, poor standards living etc. The 2010 report did not have a single instance of a balance sheet, for by then, attention was more closely focused on those in poverty.

The broad balance sheet of human development in the 1990 *Human Development Report* may have been an attempt to reconfigure the agenda away from the dominance of the IMF’s and World Bank’s priority on government balance sheets. Loans to developing countries, especially in the 1980s, had focused on countries’ ability to pay back those loans by looking at their national balance sheets and making sure that governments did not have more liabilities than assets. But once the international agenda had clearly shifted away from those 1980s concerns, the use of one-sided balance sheets of poverty in the 1997 and 2010 *Human Development Reports* can be seen as a reflection of shifting the development project to focus primarily on those parts of the population and areas that are denied development and those that are poor.

The shifting focus towards poverty is also palpable in the oral histories conducted within the UN Intellectual History Project (see footnote 3 above). The interviewees, such as Mihaly Simai, a member of the UN Committee for Development Planning and involved in the New International Economic Order and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and Hans Singer, an economist at various UN agencies between 1947 and 1969, including the United Nations Children Fund, World Food Program, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and the African Development Bank, partly narrated this shift as a reaction to the dominance of structural adjustment plans, which were clearly increasing poverty (Simai, 2000, p.86; Singer, 2000). As

confirmed by several interviewees, by the early 2000s, poverty had become the “number one priority” (Mills, 2000, p.40, see also 151; Pronk, 2000, pp.43–44; Simai, 2000, pp.75–76, 85; Singer, 2000, p.6; Klein, 2002, p.33) (Donald Mills was Jamaica’s permanent representative to the UN, 1973-1981; Jan Pronk served as Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 1980-1986; and Lawrence Klein served as a consultant at several UN agencies). These accounts articulate a redefinition of development from something that used to be about growth and economy and the nation state, to a process of nurturing people and their capabilities, and thence to something that focuses on people that are denied development. Wealth was first humanized in ‘people are the real wealth of the nation,’ and then, as one interviewee, Adebayo Adedeji, executive secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa from 1975 to 1991, said, rapid economic growth coupled with increasing poverty pushed the UNDP to see dehumanizing forms of growth, because “poverty dehumanizes” (Adedeji, 2001, p.86). Another interviewee, Singer, was the most explicit:

The creation of the Human Development Report—that certainly is an example of dynamic leadership which has, by now, made the reduction of poverty the main objective of development. It has made it universal, at least rhetorically (Singer, 2000, p.6).

The reasons given in the oral histories for such a shift “seems to reflect a realization that development prescriptions have not had the promised effects as far as that condition is concerned” (Mills, 2000, p.151) and that “if the world is not going to deal with poverty problems, then all the other things would be wasted because the growth of poverty would sweep away the achievements in other areas” (Simai, 2000, p.75).

The oral histories were also more explicit about the repercussions of poverty on development than the *Human Development Report*. One interviewee argued that rising poverty and inequalities were considered a threat to political stability. “The have-nots of the world,” argued Mills, were not going “to wait patiently” (Mills, 2000, p.153). “Let’s recognize also that there is the matter of radical right wing ideology and action, fascism ... associated with critical social and economic conditions in Europe and in Latin America, for example” (Mills, 2000, p.152). In short, increasing global poverty and subsequent international migration pushed the UNDP officials to treat global deprivation as their number one priority.

The refocus on poverty within development discourse was not, however, exclusive to the UNDP. Other global institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, as well as academic circles and non-governmental organizations, were also refocusing their definitions and measurement of development to incorporate poverty. Our example of the UNDP is therefore not an anomaly, but rather an instance of a growing trend within development discourse. As documented by secondary sources and the World Bank itself, weak and variable growth performance in East Asia, Latin America's loss of development in the 1980s, and Sub-Saharan Africa's increasing number of people living in poverty, meant that the World Bank, as well as other international institutions, had to deal more directly with poverty and income distribution (Shahid, 2008; OBrien et al., 2009).

It takes only a quick glimpse at the successive World Bank's annual *World Development Reports* (first published in 1978) to see that the Bank's objective also became more explicitly concerned with reducing poverty as of 1990 (World Bank, 1990). This was evident at the World Summit for Social Development (note its title) of 1995, a conference called by the World Bank to celebrate its 50-year anniversary. The summit gathered many protestors chanting '50 years is enough' – a reaction to worsening standards of living and increasing poverty and inequality in some regions, thought to be induced by the IMF and World Bank's structural adjustment policies (Shahid, 2008). Researchers and civil society were ever more convinced that their policies did not reduce poverty, as the IMF and World Bank had promised they would (e.g. (Roy, 1997; Felice, 1997, pp.110–113). As argued by O'Brian et al. the multilateral economic institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF, have engaged more with social groups since the 1980s, creating a new structure where bottom-up processes are given more room to voice concerns and suggest alternative actions (OBrien et al., 2009, pp.1–3). The post-hegemonic approach that followed acknowledged differences in development principles and prescribed more modest goals (OBrien et al., 2009, p.5). The 1995 World Summit brought together the largest group of world leaders at the time, and was the "first time at such a high level the international community committed itself to doing something about poverty" (Felice, 1997, p.108). One of the commitments signed by the leaders present declared: "we commit ourselves to the goal of eradicating poverty in the world" (Felice, 1997, p.108).

A second initiative, the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative, launched in the following year 1996 by the World Bank and IMF, was supposed to attend to the problematic “links between debt relief, poverty reduction, and social policies” (IMF, 2011). As of 1996, loan recipients were required to write a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper that constructed a national plan to reduce poverty in accordance with the Millennium Development Goal’s major target to halve global poverty.⁴ One interviewee, Sartaj Aziz, first director of commodities and trade at the Food and Agriculture Organization in 1971 and then assistant president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development in 1977, found a continuance from the UNDP’s work on poverty to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (Aziz, 2001, p.80).

The then World Bank president, James D. Wolfensohn, responded to the protestors at the 1995 Summit and growing criticisms of the Bank’s operations by encouraging the Bank’s economists to seek inputs from other social sciences, inducing the Bank to take a more expansive view on development. Well-known economists with a broader view of development, such as Sen and Douglas North, openly supported the change. Consequently, the Bank’s mission statement became “A world free of poverty” – notably carved into the wall at the Washington headquarters⁵ and the title of a book commissioned by the Bank published in 2000 (Granzow, 2000). The increasing poverty and inequality pushed several international institutions to understand that the poor were active economic agents, yet often powerless to better their socio-economic situation. Continuing the trend, the 2000 *World Development Report* was entitled *Attacking Poverty*, arguing that “faced with this picture of global poverty and inequality, the international community has set itself several goals for the opening years of the century, based on the discussions at various United Nations Conferences in the 1990s,” prioritizing especially the reduction of poverty (World Bank, 2000, p.6).

In sum, the UNDP’s development approach originally intended to *broaden* the definition of development by including other elements than economic growth and average income. But the 1997 and 2010 *Human Development Reports* illustrate a *change* in the definition of what development is and how it should be evaluated. As the 2010 *Human Development Report* noted, the intention was to stimulate “reasoned public debate beyond the traditional focus on aggregates” to focus on, and define,

⁴ The Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative then replaced the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative in 2005.

⁵ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview#1>

development in terms of inequality and poverty (UNDP, 2010, p.1). We shall now turn to the innovations in measurements at the UNDP that corresponded to these redefinitions and refocusing of development.

3. Measuring Development in terms of Poverty: from averages to inequalities

As the definition of development became more focused on the have-nots, the corresponding UNDP measures evolved from the Human Development Index, through the Human Poverty Index and finally to the Multidimensional Poverty Index. These three moments saw the UNDP move from measuring averages of the national level to measuring differences at the national and sub-national level including specific subgroups of the population. In the first moment at 1990, it was Sen who helped secure acceptance for the idea that the singular, one-dimensional measure of progress defined by national income per capita was inadequate and should be replaced by the new multidimensional Human Development Index (Stewart, 2017, p.16; Sen, 1979, 1999). Moment two in 1997 saw the development of the Human Development Index into the Human Poverty Index. Moment 3 in 2010 introduced three “new tools” to the “*Human Development Report* family of indices,” including the Multidimensional Poverty Index (UNDP, 2010, p.1). The latter index explicitly developed multiple indicators of physical poverty better to define the dimensions of inequality to capture the unevenness of poverty.

The turn to the Human Development Index was prompted by what was seen as over-reliance on average per capita Gross National Product, a monetary, and average, assessment of development – as narrated in Morgan and Bach (2018). The Human Development Index included “three essential elements of human life – longevity, knowledge and decent living standards” (UNDP, 1990, p.12).

Although the

ideal would be to include many variables, to obtain as comprehensive a picture as possible [...] Too many indicators could produce a perplexing picture – perhaps distracting policy makers from the main overall trends. The crucial issue therefore is of emphasis (UNDP, 1990, p.11).

Too many indicators “would blur its focus and make it difficult to interpret and use” (UNDP, 1990, p.13). The first key indicator – life expectancy at birth – was chosen because “various indirect benefits (such as adequate nutrition and good health) are closely associated with higher life expectancy” (UNDP, 1990, p.12). Literacy rates, the second indicator, was illustrative of human

development because “literacy is a person’s first step in learning and knowledge-building” (UNDP, 1990, p.12). The third element – “command over resources needed for a decent living” – was the “most difficult to measure simply” (UNDP, 1990, p.12). Primarily for reasons of data availability, the UNDP used the logarithm of real Gross Domestic Product per capita for the income indicator from 1990 to 2010, and the Gross National Product per capita as of 2010. Each of these elements was weighted equally in making up the index number.

The Human Poverty Index was introduced in the 1997 *Human Development Report* and was supposed to better reflect the deprivation in developing countries. But critically, “Rather than measure poverty by income, it uses indicators of the most basic dimensions of deprivation: a short life, lack of basic education and lack of access to public and private resources” (UNDP, 1997, p.5). Again, there were three elements, all equally weighted. The first two measured characteristics more relevant for people in poverty, rather than the average person as the Human Development Index did: the health and education components measured probability at birth of not surviving to age 40 and adult literacy rate. The biggest difference, however, from the Human Development Index was in the standard of living component; rather than using a single monetary ‘poverty line’ for all countries, it aimed to get closer to a measurement of poverty in real terms by including an unweighted average of population without sustainable access to an improved water source and children under weight for age. This third component thus included two sub-components. The rationale for these physical indicators was explained in the report: money amongst the poor was not a good measure of standards of living, so using different national monetary poverty lines did not allow for a useful comparison across countries:

the use of the same poverty line in different countries can be very misleading because of the variation in “necessary” commodities. [...] As a result, the minimum income needed to escape social estrangement can be quite different between communities (UNDP, 1997, p.18).

Another poverty index was then added in the 2010 *Human Development Report*, the Multidimensional Poverty Index, developed with the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (UNDP, 2010, p.95; Alkire and Santos, 2010). The Multidimensional Poverty Index measured both the headcount (and so share) of the multidimensionally poor people in society, and the average number of deprivations each multidimensionally poor household experienced. The index

maintained the three key categories found in the Human Development Index and Human Poverty Index: education, health and standard of living. However, the index included ten indicators (that became linked to the Millennium Development Goals) instead of 3 seen in the Human Development Index or 4 in the Human Poverty Index. According to the index, a poor household was one deprived in at least two to six indicators (the cut-off depended on the weight of each indicator), which was taken to reflect “acute deprivations” (UNDP, 2010, p.95) – see table below for full list of indicators/measurements included in the index and their weighting.

Table 1 – Multidimensional Poverty Index

Component	Indicators/Measurements	W*
Health	Child mortality (if any child has died in the family)	1/6
	Nutrition (if any adult or child in the family is malnourished)	1/6
Education	Years of schooling (if no household member has completed 5 years of schooling)	1/6
	Child school attendance (if any school-aged child is out of school in years 1 to 8)	1/6
Standard of Living	Electricity (if household does not have electricity)	1/18
	Drinking water (if household does not meet Millennium Development Goals definitions, or is more than 30 mins walk)	1/18
	Sanitation (if household does not meet Millennium Development Goals definitions, or is more than 30 mins walk)	1/18
	Flooring (if the floor is dirt, sand, or dung)	1/18
	Cooking fuel (if the household cooks with wood, charcoal or dung)	1/18
	Assets (if household does not own more than one of: radio, tv, telephone, bike, motorbike or refrigerator and do not own a car or truck)	1/18

Notes: *W=weighting

The Multidimensional Poverty Index showed then not just the number or proportion of people that are poor in a country, district, or by a specific identity group, but also the intensity of such poverty (UNDP, 2010, p.95). The report explained that

the Human Poverty Index used country averages to reflect aggregate deprivations in health, education and standard of living. It could not identify specific individuals, households or larger groups of people as jointly deprived. The Multidimensional Poverty Index addresses this shortcoming by capturing how many people experience overlapping deprivations and how many deprivations they face on average. It can be broken down by dimension to show how the composition of multidimensional poverty changes in incidence and intensity for different regions, ethnic groups and so on—with useful implications for policy (UNDP, 2010, p.95).

The inventors of the Multidimensional Poverty Index argued that including more dimensions of poverty could help policy makers to know what to focus on depending on the region. For instance, India was shown to have higher levels of poverty according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index than according to the number of people below the World Bank’s \$1-a-day poverty line, suggesting

that policy should focus on non-income factors or basic needs. Using the measurements meant policymakers could target particular goals and concentrate on which particular indicators revealed the worst outcomes (e.g. if water supply had lower results, then irrigation could be prioritized).

The large amount of data needed to compile the Multidimensional Poverty Index meant, however, that the index as a whole could only be compiled for just over 100 countries (whereas the Human Development Index existed for most countries). The Multidimensional Poverty Index has nevertheless managed to dethrone singular (unidimensional) measurements of income poverty – such as the World Bank’s \$1-a-day measure, just as earlier, the Human Development Index had managed to compete with the average monetary measure of development found in the per capita Gross National Product (Alkire and Foster, 2009). But at the same time, the UNDP’s poverty indices also created a physical poverty line, as supposed to the World Bank’s monetary poverty line. This changed the target population, who was measured, and the prescribed and implemented policies.

Research on the various definitions of poverty have included some discussion on how poverty lines attempt to distinguish and draw a line between the poor and non-poor, but none adequately finds a break between the two groups (Laderchi et al., 2003, p.13; Stewart et al., 2007). Similarly, with the UNDP’s poverty indices, the population is split into those who are poor and those who are not. In the Human Development Index and other aggregate figures, the population was seen as one average person, but in the poverty indices, population becomes at least binary. Depending on the cut-off points in the indices, a person or household is either in the category of people who are poor or they are not. Poverty indices account for more heterogeneity than Human Development Index, because they move away from averages that make one number represent all people. But the constraints on what could be measured, and for how many countries such numbers were available, meant that this move to more complex index numbers based on many component indicators could only go so far.

It is clear now that changing the focus onto poverty prompted the UNDP to add new measurements to its tool box. The target went from increasing aggregate income or wealth – largely defined in the three main components of Human Development Index – to getting a certain group of society out of poverty – largely defined in the three (same) main elements in the Human Poverty and Multidimensional Poverty Indices.

Why did the human development approach shift – in definition, in focus and in measurement?

From our contextual reading, one reason seems to lie in the need for something that everyone could agree on. The oral histories make it clear that the officials were constantly striving for a particular definition and measurement tool to be seen, heard, used, and widely disseminated, all in the name of bringing human development to the deprived. For instance, one interviewee, Adedeji, spoke of how the South needed, despite the difficulty, to decide on a minimum standard and in turn persuade the North to agree, because “unless you get the support of the North, your resolutions will not pass” (Adedeji, 2001, p. 106). In Kofi Annan’s interview, he narrated how he proposed the Millennium Summit when he took office as the 7th Secretary-General of the UN in 1997 to review “what we should be focusing on, so that we can reorient our efforts and direct our resources” (Annan, 2002, p. 24). A third interviewee, Margaret J. Anstee, an employee at the UN between 1952 and 1993 most notably serving as the Under-Secretary General in 1987, described how her work on peacebuilding led to an agreement. She remembered the event fondly: “It is so nice at the UN when you find everyone in agreement,” “We don’t want the kind of report that says, ‘X said this, but on the other hand, Y said this.’ We want something that states clearly, ‘We have agreed on a course of action’” (Anstee, 2000, p.157). The sense is that a sufficient amount of agreement has to be found to establish new norms and subsequent policy actions. It seemed important to find one definition, goal and target that formed a consensus, an ‘umbrella’ that could cover the work at the UNDP, IMF and World Bank.

And yet, the UNDP admitted that it was a difficult task to find consensus. In Mills’ interview, he said it was impossible to get an unanimity: “can you get agreement on a global strategy that is going to satisfy, say the developing countries. It is not possible” (Mills, 2000, p.30). In the 2010 *Human Development Report*, the shift was narrated as being founded on Sen’s thesis in the *Idea of Justice* that “we need not agree on the lineaments of a perfectly just society” (UNDP, 2010, p.16), provided “we can agree that some states of affairs are better than others. We can identify clear injustices that people and societies must remove” (UNDP, 2010, p.16). Sen thus disagreed with the dominant idea, exemplified by John Rawls, that we can “secure agreement on what constitutes a just society and its associated rules and institutions” (UNDP, 2010, p.16). As quoted in section 2 above, the move towards a focus on the have-nots came from UNDP’s realization that despite the world’s

“many gains,” “the human development approach is motivationally committed to concentrating on what remains undone ... from poverty and deprivation to inequality” (UNDP, 2010, p.vi). The UNDP should not only concentrate on evaluating, measuring and defining people who were prospering, not even on the average person, but should rather concentrate on the have-nots. Refocusing human development onto the poor had then become a question of political, cultural and institutional practicality.

4. Development numbers for ‘greater accountability’?

UNDP officials assumed that measurement not only led to a better understanding of reality but also prompted action and created the information set for much needed accountability. What kind of an accounting regime is this? Firstly, accounting requires the definition of categories of account. Providing numbers of development provided the possibility for ‘audit’ just as numbers used in organizations provide the information to monitor performance and to those to account those responsible for that performance. For instance, measurement was thought to help set targets, which Annan explained in his interview,

I think by having goals and challenging the governments to implement, and telling them we will monitor and produce annual reports, so we can see where we are succeeding and where we are failing, we are really challenging everybody to step up and really deliver (Annan, 2002, pp.31–32).

Moreover, he expressed a need for such numbers for a “benchmark,” because if you did not, you “set yourself up, as you say, for failure” (Annan, 2002, p.32).

The *Human Development Reports* told a similar narrative, in which development numbers were explicitly linked to accountability.⁶ A section in the 2010 *Human Development Report* was entitled “Moves towards greater accountability” (UNDP, 2010, p.21). The section continued,

Over time, the focus on monitoring has grown, linked to a movement supporting greater state and donor accountability. Results-based management, including using performance information in making budget allocations, has featured in several public sector reforms (UNDP, 2010, p.21).

Similarly, there was a box in the 1997 *Human Development Report* entitled “Monitoring progress in eradicating poverty,” where monitoring is said to lead (amongst other things) to “establishing public accountability for progress in poverty reduction” (UNDP, 1997, p.115). “A strategy for poverty

⁶ Michael Power’s *The Audit Society* explains how “definitions are attempts to fix a practice within a particular set of norms or ideals” (Power, 1999, p.5).

eradication must focus not only on what need, to be done, but on how to ensure that action is taken” (UNDP, 1997, pp.110–111). The UNDP wanted to ensure that action was taken by measuring and publicizing their numbers on the trends of poverty.

An important element in using measurements as a prompt for action came from the fact that those numbers provided comparative information about each individual country’s poverty conditions and reduction performance, and so the effect of measurement helped to build accountability not just within UNDP programs and to prompt their actions, but also for individual countries. As Sen and Richard Jolly, the co-director of the UN Intellectual History Project, and previously the deputy executive director of UNICEF and special advisor to the administrator of UNDP and architect of the *Human Development Report*, said in their interviews: indices were designed so that countries’ performance could be easily and effectively compared (Jolly, 2005, p.134; Sen, 2003, p.24). The UNDP believed in the need for ranking countries and measurement as a means to see whether countries were meeting agreed-upon targets, but also to set these countries into competition with each other (Morgan and Bach, 2018). The examples above illustrate that the UNDP ran such an auditing regime – measuring performance and holding to account – where country differences were measured in order to spur domestic action.

In the late 20th century, this audit regime also manifested itself through the ways in which international loans to reduce debt in developing countries were made *conditional on targeting poverty* (Stewart, 2017, p.18). The Millennium Development Goals marked the international commitment to reducing multidimensional poverty – halving income poverty by 2015 and non-income factors such as infant mortality, and to increasing education and nutrition etc. Economic growth was not mentioned (Stewart, 2017, p.18). As noted above, the IMF and World Bank did not only measure how successfully developing countries were paying their loans, but also how they fared on social factors – through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative.

However, in many respects, the project of holding countries to account using poverty measurements produced at the UNDP fell short as it was difficult to hold any country to account. One interviewee, John Gerard Ruggie, assistant secretary-general and senior advisor for strategic planning to Secretary-General Kofi Annan, 1997-2001, was explicit about the lack of UNDP’s ability to

enforce targets on countries: “Obviously they have their own independent governing bodies, and there is not much we can do to force them to change their behaviour” (Ruggie, 2001, p.54). “But,” he continued, “we can certainly define initiatives and projects in such a way to get them very interested” (Ruggie, 2001, p.54). Similarly, Annan, in his interview, made it clear to the national governments at the UNDP, “You are the ones who have to go back home and implement it. It can only work if we take action at the country level. [...] It’s your responsibility to implement” (Annan, 2002, p.31). The UNDP could create a change to a human-oriented development and poverty reducing program, but it could not effectively enforce or create change in countries’ practices unless they chose to act.

If the UNDP had political power, all these measurements might have been less necessary as audit tools. As one interviewee, Leticia Shahani, assistant secretary-general for social development and humanitarian affairs, 1981-1986, affirmed,

if you are in power, legitimate power, you can eliminate poverty overnight if you want to. [...] You don’t need all that intellectual and technical equipment. Even if you have the tools to measure, the political will is so important and the sincerity, the credibility of government (Shahani, 1999, p.30).

In a time, said Shahani, when political leadership on reducing poverty was lacking “the UN fills this vacuum but inadequately” (Shahani, 1999, p.30). Shahani believed that the “UN has the moral authority,” but it had to be careful to not go too far: “That is the culture of the UN system. Member governments are jealous of the UN having too much power, even in issues of development and elimination of poverty” (Shahani, 1999, p.30), and ultimately the UNDP had no political power to implement change. Instead, it had to rely on changes in measurement and to publicize them as tools of persuasion.

The UNDP’s audit regime also lacked power to hold governments to account because it allowed negotiation and failure. As Mike Power has found, when the accountancy regime is rather vague and lacks strictness, failure becomes ‘negotiable’ (Power, 1999, p.130). The targets or benchmarks are set by the very institutions the UNDP set out to discipline. Accountability may then be skewed if the agents measured are choosing what should be measured in the first place. For example, in Paul Streeten’s interview, who worked on the construction of the Human Development Index, the freedom index was not included in the Human Development Index because

If you think of the United Nations as an organization of governments, not individuals or groups but governments, some of the explanation of the denial of human rights is to be expected. When we put forward the freedom index in the Human Development Report, Malaysia, India, and others objected (Streeten, 2001, p.77).

Finally, in some cases, the UNDP seemed to admit defeat before measuring had even begun. For instance, Bernard T.G. Chidzero, who most notably worked at the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development, 1968-1980, narrated in his interview that targets were set knowing that they may not be achieved because “at least you know how difficult the task is” (Chidzero, 2000, p.128).

One might ask: What legitimacy does an institution have, if it does not hold itself or its members accountable and if the measures are set by the institutions it is supposed to be disciplining? Newell and Bellour argued in their survey of accountability in development discourse and projects that “inconsequential accountability is not accountability at all” (Newell and Bellour, 2002, p.8). Accountability “implies both a measure of *answerability* (providing an account for actions undertaken) and *enforceability* (punishment or sanctions for poor or illegal performance) (Newell and Bellour, 2002, pp.1–2) (italics in original). Despite accountability implying unequal power relations – who has the power to call for an account and who is forced to explain their actions – no one is completely powerless. There are ways power can be exerted bottom-up – even if to a lesser extent (Newell and Bellour, 2002, pp.2–3). It is clear that the UNDP understood this conundrum, and this explains the importance they attached to the publication of comparable numbers and their willingness to sponsor ‘bottom-up’ prompts to actions.

Thus by the 1997 *Human Development Report*, the UNDP seemed to want the poor, or people closest to poverty, to define poverty for it included definitions of poverty by poor people, or people living amongst poverty. In the first chapter of the 1997 *Human Development Report*, poverty definitions from the margins of society are placed in the margins of the page. Some speak of social consequences of poverty: an educator from Colombia wrote that “poverty ... does not allow people to be people” and a single mother from Guyana stated that “poverty is ... loneliness, ... discrimination and abuse” (UNDP, 1997, p.16). Nevertheless, the majority discussed economic deprivation: a panhandler from the United states said “Poverty means never having quite enough to eat” and a refugee from Azerbaijan felt that “Poverty is the impossibility of living in your own home” (UNDP, 1997, p.16-20). Similarly, the World Bank’s 2000 *World Development Report* was partly based on

interviews with 60,000 poor people in 60 different countries (World Bank, 2000, p.2-3). Additionally, the IMF's and World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers of 2000 were supposedly written hand-in-hand with the country loan-recipients, although research has shown that every Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper is essentially identical and follows the agencies' strategies (Stewart and Wang, 2005)!⁷ Nevertheless, Newell and Bellour found that the new relationship between international organizations, private sector actors, civil society and non-governmental organizations – what O'Brian et al. (2000) labelled complex multilateralism – produced new “opportunities for the construction of new accountabilities” (Newell and Bellour, 2002, p.4).

Our analysis of the Human Development Index, Human Poverty Index and Multidimensional Poverty Index since the 1990s shows how socio-economic characteristics were measured and brought into developmental policy debates and implementation, with an evident consequence that over the last 25 years the regime of accountability via measurements has expanded considerably. Power (1999) demonstrates convincingly that such audit processes are most powerful when they employ the less powerful – in our case the poor – in the regime of audit: “The ideal form of surveillance is the totally observed and known individual who ends up as a self-observing and self-disciplining agent” (Power, 1999, p.128). Similarly, O'Brian et al. identified four reasons why the relatively powerful and influential international organizations listen to the relatively insignificant and powerless social movements pushed by civil society and non-governmental organizations. First, the international organizations may have known better what the problems were and, second, it was easier to implement policy through non-governmental organizations on the ground. Third, if international organizations had the support of civil society and private actors, public support could be secured, and a project was more likely to be implemented. Finally, in some cases there were increasing direct demands from governments to cater to these smaller stakeholders and in other cases the international organizations were pre-empting complaints from governments (O'Brian et al., 2000, pp.19-20).

Was the UNDP devolving the regime of auditing to the poor, or to poor countries, to empower them, or rather to integrate them into the regime of self-audit as the audit expansion went on? Were they in fact empowered? We are not convinced that any devolution of definitions of

⁷ We thank Frances Stewart for bringing this paper to our attention.

measurement, or of audit, actually occurred in the UNDP case. The *Human Development Reports* were primarily written by elites in the offices of the international agencies. Stewart (2007; 2017) observes and analyses the impact of a dominant developed world dictating not just policy but even measurement and accounting regimes to developing countries (naturally varying in degrees across regions). An international auditing regime is one such consequence of unequal international relations – i.e. developing countries are measured and judged on a set of indicators that rank them against the rest of the world. In turn, this set the agenda in developing countries, which was often directly implemented from abroad through institutions like the IMF and World Bank, and indirectly through the UN.

5. Conclusion

The progression from Human Development Index, Human Poverty Index and then to Multidimensional Poverty Index was a shift from focusing on development to poverty reduction. The shift refocused the target of the UNDP research activity, changed what was measured, and in turn who was measured, from the average of everyone's economic activity to the characteristic problems of the poor. The UNDP officials and *Human Development Reports* boasted of the need for more measurement tools and targets to create greater accountability and policy actions. But while the measurement tools multiplied, and the possibilities for audit within and between countries massively increased, accountability to the UNDP remained shaky. As Power argued, more accounting does not necessarily lead to better accountability (Power, 1999, p.127).

Ultimately, UNDP's shift towards focusing on poverty was short lived. The Millennium Development and Sustainable Development Goals in 2000 and 2015 broadened the attention in development projects and discourse with several more goals and even more measures. The goals have widened the concept of development beyond poverty and development – including, for instance, environmental degradation to a much larger extent. 2010, perhaps, then marked the end of a 20-year project which first modified development discourse towards human development and then to poverty. We are now in a period of development being defined more broadly as how to live a good life.

References

- Alkire, S. & Foster, J. (2009) Counting and Multidimensional Poverty Measurement. *OPHI Working Paper No. 32*.
- Alkire, S. & Santos, M. E. (2010) Acute Multidimensional Poverty: A New Index for Developing Countries. *OPHI Working Paper No. 38*.
- Cornia, G. A. et al. (eds.) (1987) *Adjustment with a human face*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cornia, G. A. (2016) An Econometric Analysis of the Bifurcation of Within-Country Inequality Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa 1990-2011. UNDP RBA Working Paper Series 1 (January).
- Felice, W. (1997) The Copenhagen Summit: A Victory for the World Bank? *Social Justice*. 24 (1), 107–119.
- Granzow, S. (2000) *Our Dream A World free of Poverty*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- IMF (2011) Factsheet: Debt Relief Under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. *Imf*. [online]. Available from: <http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts/hipc.htm>.
- Jolly, R., L. Emmerij, D. Ghai and F. Lapeyre. 2004. *UN contributions to development thinking and practice*. United Nations Intellectual History Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jolly, R., L. Emmerij and T. G. Weiss. 2009. *UN Ideas that changed the world*. United Nations Intellectual History Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Laderchi, C. R. et al. (2003) Does it matter that we don't agree on the definition of poverty? A comparison of four approaches. QEJ Working paper series
- Morgan, M. S. & Bach, M. (2018) Measuring Development—from the UN's Perspective. *History of Political Economy*. 50 (S1), 193–210.
- Newell, P. & Bellour, S. (2002) Mapping Accountability: Origins, Contexts and Implications for Development. *Institute of Development Studies Working Paper*. 36.
- O'Brien, R. et al. (2009) Contesting Global Governance. *Contesting Global Governance*. [Online]
- Power, M. (1999) *The Audit Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roy, S. (1997) Globalisation, structural change and poverty: Some conceptual and policy issues. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 32 (33/34), 2117–2135.
- Sen, A. (1999) *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Sen, A. (1979) 'Equality of what?', in *Tanner lectures on human values*. 1979 Stanford University, California: pp. 195–220.
- Shahid, Y. (2008) 'Freeing the World of Poverty', in *Development Economics through the Decades: A Critical Look at Thirty Years of the World Development Report*. New York: World Bank Publications. p.
- Stewart, F. (2017) 'Changing approaches to development since 1950 – drawing on Polanyi', in *HOPE Annual Conference*. 2017 Durham, N. C.
- Stewart, F. et al. (2007) *Defining Poverty in the Developing World*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stewart, F. & Wang, M. (2005) Do PRSPs empower poor countries and disempower the World Bank, or is it the other way round? *Globalization and the Nation State: The impact of the IMF and the World Bank*. (108), 290–322.
- UNDP (1990) *Human Development Report*.
- UNDP (1997) *Human Development Report*.
- UNDP (2010) *Human Development Report*.
- Ward, M. 2004. *Quantifying the world: UN ideas and statistics*. United Nations Intellectual History Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Woodward, D. (1992) *Debt, adjustment, and poverty in developing countries: The impact of debt and adjustment at household level in developing countries*. Vol. 2. London: Pinter/Save the Children.
- World Bank (2000) *World Development Report: Attacking Poverty*.
- World Bank (1990) *World Development Report 1990 Poverty*.

UN Oral History Interviews

The Oral History Interviews in the Complete Oral History Transcripts from UN Voices, CD-ROM (New York: United Nations Intellectual History Project, 2007).

Interviews cited include: Adedeji, Adebayo (2001): 1-115

Annan, Kofi (2002): 1-36

Anstee, Margaret J. (2000): 1-169

Aziz, Sartaj (2001): 1-145
Chidzero, Bernard T.G. (2000): 1-138
Klein, Lawrence R. (2002): 1-42
Jolly, Richard (2005): 1-154
Mills, Donald (2000): 1-174
Pronk, Jan (2000): 1-51
Ruggie, John (2001): 1-58
Sen, Amartya (2003): 1-29
Shahani, Leticia (1999): 1-58
Simai, Mihaly (2000): 1-106
Singer, Hans W. (2000): 1-165
Streeten, Paul (2001): 1-135