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ASSESSMENT
EXPANDING FREEDOMS, CHANGING STRUCTURES:
THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2014

Séverine Deneulin¹

UNDP, Human Development Report 2014. Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience. New York: UNDP, 2014. ix + 225 pp. Downloadable from:

<http://hdr.undp.org/en/2014-report>

Introduction

The UNDP has recently celebrated twenty five years of publishing its annual Human Development Report. The Report acts as a counterweight to the World Bank's World Development Report and fulfils the unique function of providing a comprehensive coverage of the progress of countries in improving the wellbeing of their residents. More than seven hundreds regional and national human development reports have been produced since 1990. Human beings, and the quality of their lives, are the ultimate objective of policy and the real wealth of nations. Economic growth can be a useful means to that end but it can sometimes be harmful, if, for example, it is accompanied by ecosystem destruction and air pollution or more insecure jobs. As the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon puts it in his 25th anniversary congratulatory message, 'For too long before the advent of this landmark series, a nation's prosperity was viewed solely through the lens of economic growth. This approach obscured a central truth: people are the real wealth of a nation. The Human Development Report helped change the perspective, from the things that a nation produces – to the people who actually produce them.'²

The 2014 Human Development Report, like previous ones, is addressed at policy-makers and development actors in order to help them take a human development perspective in their policy decisions. The human development perspective is 'about enabling the disadvantaged and excluded to realize their rights, express their concerns, to be heard and to become active agents in shaping their destiny' (p.5). Whether the Human Development Reports have been successful at meeting their objective, and whether they have been influential in

¹ I thank Jonathan Hall, Oscar Garza Vazquez, Frances Stewart and the editors of *Development and Change* for comments on an earlier draft.

² <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/foreword-25th-anniversary-human-development-report> [retrieved 29 May 2015]

shaping policy at the national and global levels, is difficult to establish. They have undoubtedly changed policy discourses.³

The Report has vulnerability and resilience as running themes. It focuses on how the wellbeing gains of the last three decades can be sustained in the face of increasingly adverse shocks, such as climate change, conflict or financial or macroeconomic instability. It argues that ‘an account of progress in human development is incomplete without exploring and assessing vulnerability’ (p. 1). How can current achievements in nutrition, education, health and other human development advances, not be lost? Who are the groups most at risk of losing the opportunities they currently enjoy? How can resilience mechanisms be built to sustain present achievements? These are some of the key questions the Report is seeking to answer. Chapter 1 discusses the concept of human resilience, and what can enhance or diminish the capacity of communities to resist threats or shocks. Chapter 2 traces the evolution of various human development dimensions, and the disparities which remain within and across countries. Chapters 3 and 4 dwell on the groups which are the most vulnerable to human development losses – women, the elderly, the disabled, indigenous peoples and informal sector workers – and examine what kinds of institutional mechanisms better work at protecting them. The Report calls for a strong commitment to universal social protection. Chapter 5 takes an inter-dependent view on vulnerability and resilience and explores how local, national and international strategies can best work together to build resilience and reduce vulnerability. It concludes that the provision of global public goods, such as international financial stability and low carbon emissions, and a reform of the global governance system, is critical to that end.

Compared to previous years, the 2014 Report contains a much greater structural emphasis. It talks not only of ‘vulnerable people’ but of ‘structurally vulnerable groups’. It states that ‘structural vulnerabilities’ appear ‘where social and legal institutions, power structures, political spaces, or traditions and socio-cultural norms do not serve members of society equally – and where they create structural barriers for some people and groups to exercise their rights and choices’ (p.70). It does not talk only of the resilience people have to cope with shocks but also of the resilience of communities as a whole (p. iv).

The incidence of vulnerability which the Report documents is striking. Globally, 1.5 billion workers are in informal or precarious employment (p. 3). This constitutes nearly half of all workers worldwide. This means that 50 per cent of the world population lack any type of social security (p.8). Readers are also informed that 46 per cent of people aged above 60

³ See Sehnbruch et al. (2015) for the influence of human development at policy discourses level.

worldwide suffer from a disability (p.3). More than 2.2 billion people are vulnerable to multi-dimensional poverty and 1.5 billion people are multi-dimensionally poor (p.19).⁴ The scale of the challenges and tasks at hand is overwhelming.

At first glance, the policy prescriptions to change this state of affairs appear standard: education and health for all, universal access to basic social services, pensions, more labour and social protection, structural transformation of the economy to provide more jobs, and provision of global public goods. At a closer glance however, the Report contains an innovative policy prescription, on which it does unfortunately not expand. On page 9, one reads the statement that ‘those with the least capacity to cope with shocks are the least involved in creating regulations, norms and goals of global governance’. This invites for a discussion on how vulnerable people can become actors of their own lives and change the structures which keep them in a situation of vulnerability.

This assessment focuses on four points raised by the 2014 Report and whose treatment remains problematic: 1) the connection between capabilities and choices; 2) the relationship between high levels of human development and ecological (un)sustainability; 3) the idea of ‘social competences’ (Stewart 2013) as a necessary complement to that of capabilities; 4) the agency of vulnerable groups to change the structures which hinder their opportunities to live long, healthy and creative lives.

On capabilities and choices

The Human Development Reports are conceptually based on the ‘capability approach’. Sen introduced the idea of ‘capability’ in the late 1970s as an alternative space to utility and primary goods to measure equality. The capability approach has become the name of a moral approach which ‘sees persons from two different perspectives: wellbeing and agency’ (Sen 1985: 169).⁵

The Report often uses the expression ‘capabilities and choices’, but it is not clear whether capabilities are choices or whether there is a difference between them. On page 23,

⁴ A person is multi-dimensionally poor if she is deprived in at least one third of the three dimensions composing the Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which are health, education and living standards. For more information about the MPI and its 10 indicators in the 3 dimensions, see www.ophi.org.uk.

⁵ For a discussion of the capability approach, see, among others, Alkire (2005, 2008), Robeyns (2005, 2008, 2011), Sen (1985, 1992, 1993). The difference between the capability approach and human development is mainly one of origin, scope and application. The capability approach grew out of philosophy and economic theory, as a moral approach for evaluating state of affairs, and can be applied to any context where evaluation is needed. The human development approach grew out of development studies, as a policy discourse, and is applied mainly at public policy level to inform it.

capabilities are defined as ‘all the things a person can be or do’ and choices are said to depend on capabilities. A footnote adds that it is not about any choice but the ‘choices people have reason to value’. Later on, the Report gives some examples of limited choices because of lack of capabilities: ‘People should not have to choose which of their children should leave school when jobs are lost and fees are too high or to enter demeaning and dangerous trades such as sexwork or garbage scavenging to pay for food and shelter’ (p. 118); or elsewhere: ‘People with limited core capabilities, such as in education and health, are less able to live lives they value. And their choices may be restricted or held back by social barriers and other exclusionary practices.’ (p. 55)

The use of the expression ‘capabilities and choices’ is puzzling on several fronts. First, ‘choices’ are already contained in the concept of ‘capabilities’. It is worth recalling Sen’s original definition of a capability set ‘as the set of functioning vectors [a functioning vector being the set of functionings a person actually achieves] within his or her reach’ (Sen, 1985: 201), or as ‘a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being’ (Sen, 1993: 30). Thus, a person who works as sex worker because there is no other way for her to make a living lacks a capability because she lacks choice. There is a difference between a woman who has the opportunity to exercise another profession but choose to be a sex worker and a woman who has no other opportunities to earn a living. Given the close connection between choices and capabilities, earlier Reports did indeed substitute the term ‘capabilities’ for ‘choices’. Development as capability expansion (Sen 1989) was translated as expansion of people’s choices. The 2014 Report could have kept capabilities and choices as synonyms, as done in the past. Saying that ‘choices depend on capabilities’ (p. 23) is in fact saying that some capabilities depend on others, e.g., the capability to work depends on the capability to be healthy and be educated. One has no choice to enter meaningful employment if one has not had the prior opportunity to complete secondary education.

A second problem with the Report’s use of the expression ‘capabilities and choices’ is the neglect of the associated concepts of functionings. Within the capability approach, functionings and capabilities belong to the same space.⁶ Choices do matter but they are not the *only* information to take into account in moral evaluation. Let us consider a group of well-educated people who have chosen to work in a factory assembly line in exploitative and underpaid labour conditions, out of solidarity with those who have no other choice but work in these

⁶ See, among others, Alkire (2002), Alkire et al. (2015), Crocker (1995), Gasper (1997), Qizilbash (1996), Sen (1992, 1993).

conditions. Thus, one group has the choice to work elsewhere and the other does not. But is the ‘choice’ here the only element that matters in moral evaluation, or the actual beings and doings of the workers? In the capability approach, at least in Sen’s account,⁷ capabilities or choices do not always have more moral weight than the actual beings and doings:

If the wellbeing that a person gets from what she does is dependent on how she came to do it (in particular, whether she chose that functioning herself), then her well-being depends not just on x, but on the choice of x from the set S. [...] The crucial question here, in the context of wellbeing, is whether freedom to choose is valued only instrumentally, or is also important in itself. The capability approach is broad enough to permit both the rival – but interrelated – characterizations of wellbeing, and can be used in either way. (Sen 1992: 150)

In their work on disadvantage from a capability perspective, Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) have argued that too much emphasis in the capability literature has been put on the ‘choice’ distinction between capability and functioning. They propose to see the concept of capability not so much as choice but as the opportunity a person has to sustain that functioning in the future. A person who has a one-year labour contract does not have the same ‘capability’ in the sense of ‘genuine opportunity for secure functioning’ (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007: 74) than a person who has a permanent contract in the same company for doing the same job. Given the 2014 Report’s central focus on resilience, a shift away from capabilities as choices towards capabilities as opportunities for secure functionings would have been welcome.

A third problem with the Report’s recurring expression ‘capabilities and choices’ is its silence over valuable choices. Are all choices people make in their lives of equal moral weight? Which choices is the Report talking about? The choice for a girl to go to school or do domestic and care work, the choice between different types of schools, the choice between different types of shops from which to buy sweets from, and the choice of sweets she can choose from? More ‘choices’ do not necessarily lead to greater quality of life. The introduction of a dual health system, private and public, and an increase in the choice of service providers, can lead to a disinvestment in public health services, the exclusion of some groups from health care, and worsening health outcomes. As the Report rightly points out, ‘a “mixed system” tends to segment the provision of services – rich and middle class tend to opt out publicly provided education, leading to a weaker commitment to providing quality education in the publicly organized system’ (p. 90). In this case, more ‘choice’ leads to functioning losses. This is where the expression ‘capabilities and choices’ particularly acquires problematic policy implications.

⁷ Martha Nussbaum’s interpretation of the capability approach gives greater weight to choices. See, among others, Nussbaum (2011a,b)

It would be helpful if future Reports had a conceptual note about the moral framework which underpins their analysis. Should a Rwandese parliamentarian or British government minister read the Report, would they understand the specificity of the human development perspective in policy and the meaning of the expansion of ‘valuable choices’, or ‘capabilities people have reason to choose and value’, which the Reports argues to be the ultimate objective of public policy? From time to time, one hears of a head of state or government official speak of the human development imperative as a justification for displacing indigenous peoples from their land and forcing environmental destruction through mega-mining projects, what some have come to call the ‘commodities consensus’ to finance social services and public infrastructure (Svampa 2015). If the human development perspective is based on the conviction ‘that all humans should be empowered to live lives they value’ (p. 86), there needs to be a more detailed discussion about what such lives might be. Nowhere is this discussion more urgent than in the context of the environment, and this is another problematic point of the 2014 Report.

On the human and natural world

There are some data in the Report which do not get the same in-depth treatment as other data. The following statements are particularly left hanging: ‘Of 140 countries with data, 82 have ecological footprints above global carrying capacity’; ‘CO2 emissions by 90 of 185 countries exceed the global threshold’; ‘Freshwater withdrawals by 49 of 172 countries with data also exceed the global threshold’ (p. 45). The Report acknowledges that, currently, there is a positive correlation between high human development achievements, as measured by the Human Development Index, and unsustainable ecological footprints, but it does discuss how to solve this conundrum. Current global rates of production and consumption clearly exceed planetary boundaries. What could a human development perspective be on this?

The Report affirms that sustainability is best approached from the perspective of people’s lives, and not nature: ‘Protecting the environment can be viewed as a good in itself, but Sen and others have argued that a more fruitful approach is to focus on the sustainability of people and their choices’ (p. 44). If one takes the 2014 Report view, harm caused to people is morally more relevant than harm caused to nature, and the key question is not how well nature is doing but how well people are doing. As how nature is doing is reflected in how current, and future, generations, are or will be doing, e.g. quality of air is reflected in people’s health, global warming is reflected in people’s ability to feed themselves (e.g. drought destroying crops) or to be sheltered (e.g. storms destroying houses), it is argued that a human

development perspective can be reduced to assessing states of affairs in the space of human capabilities/functionings. The capability approach does however accommodate other views and some are offering a different human development perspective, bringing human and ecological concerns as one, without subsuming one to the other.

Drawing on the literature on environmental justice, Schlosberg (2009, 2012), and Schlosberg and Carruthers (2010), show that environmental harm has inherently a social justice component, with the harming of nature being almost always associated to the further harming of socially, economically and politically marginalized groups, e.g. low-income groups and black minorities in the US suffering the most from soil contamination and dumping of toxic waste, or indigenous groups in Latin America bearing the brunt of environmentally destructive mining projects.⁸ Combining the capability approach with critical theory (Fraser 2008), Schlosberg argues that environmental harms, and human capability losses, are disproportionately distributed in the hands of those who do not have their identity recognized on equal par to others (women, black, indigenous) and those who do not have adequate representation in decision-making. The Human Development Report could spend more time analysing the distribution of environmental harms, which groups bear the greatest burden and what type of representation they have in national and international policy-making, a point this assessment will develop further later on.

Another way of uniting human and environmental concerns within the capability approach has been to introduce ecosystem functionings as a meta-capability, without which no human functioning is possible at all (Holland 2008a,b, 2015).⁹ Holland (2015: 24) conceptualizes an ecological meta-capability as a human capability, for it refers to the ecological conditions for the ability humans have to live a flourishing human life. Ecosystem functionings could become part of the evaluation space of human development. The Human Development Report could adopt this perspective by revising the Human Development Index and include an environmental dimension, in addition to a health, education and living standards dimension, or replacing the GPD per capita with an environmental measure.¹⁰

⁸ For a summary of environmental grassroots struggles which integrate the human-environment dimensions, see also Anguelovski and Alier (2014).

⁹ For other discussions on introducing sustainability within the capability approach, see the special issue of the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* edited by Rauschmayer and Lessmann (2013).

¹⁰ At the Rio Earth Summit in 2012, there was a discussion within the Human Development Report Office to include an environmental dimension into the Human Development Index. A main obstacle to doing so is the lack of reliable international comparable data (personal communication, John Hall, 6 May 2015).

Another possible way of integrating ecological with human concerns, and dealing with the fact that the current mode of global production and consumption is not in synchrony with bio-capacity, is by re-connecting Sen's original notion of freedom to that of responsibility for one's actions (Sen 1985: 204).¹¹ Perhaps, the Human Development Reports could contrast stories of responsible and irresponsible actions, when the exercise of freedom has protected the environment and expanded people's capabilities, e.g. a business venture which has offered employment opportunities to disabled people and contributed to the life of ecosystems, and when it has not, e.g. a business venture which has led to job losses and environmental degradation, and the factors that make these actions possible or impossible. This raises the question of the quality of institutions, and under which institutional framework decisions are made. This is a third area which the 2014 Report deals with but leaves some important matters unattended.

On social competences

In a background paper for the 2014 Report, Stewart (2013) made the case to broaden the human development perspective beyond what individuals can be or do to include what institutions can be or do, what she calls 'social competencies'. The Report defines them 'as what social institutions can be or do; they [social competences] are in a sense the capabilities of institutions, as against those of individuals' (p. 133). Well-functioning institutions, in the form of social norms, social behaviours, and whatever rule binds a society together, matter for well-functioning individuals. A society where racist prejudices prevail and people of different colour are discriminated against is not conducive to the flourishing of these individuals. A society where patriarchal norms rule and women are seen as a commodity at the service of men seriously undermines the ability of women to develop fully their potential as human beings. A society where risk-taking and greed are rewarded and prudent economic decisions and generosity frowned upon, is not conducive to creating a business environment where individuals can have stable employment and form a life plan. A society where nature is seen as means to satisfy unlimited human desires, and where unlimited material consumption is seen as a sign of human progress, is not conducive to creating an environment where individuals can pursue a fulfilling and meaningful life within planetary boundaries.

¹¹ See Pelenc et al. (2013) and Ballet et al. (2007) for a discussion on freedom and responsibility within the capability approach.

Through the idea of social competences, the Report brings in the critical issue of power and domination to its human development perspective through the back door. Some groups are more vulnerable than others precisely because they have no power in the decisions which affect them. When not excluded from policy decision-making processes altogether, their inclusion can often be marked by relationship of domination and intimidation which keeps them in an unequal position. In many countries, disabled people have often no voice in shaping infrastructure or health policy which would facilitate their ability to move freely and work. Indigenous peoples have often no say in their government decisions to grant mining concessions on their land, and when they have, discussions are often disrupted by intimidation and violence by those more powerful to impose their will. Inhabitants of small-island states and those who live in zones most at risk from climate change have little say in the climate negotiations towards an international treaty to curb carbon emissions. This is something the Report acknowledges in a few places, when it affirms that, ‘A human development approach to resilience focuses on people and their interactions, where power and social position are important factors’ (p.16), or that ‘In many respects, the shortcomings of global governance architectures in reducing vulnerability stem from deep asymmetries of power, voice and influence’ (p. 115), but it does not discuss at length, if at all, examples of these deep asymmetries of power, and does not clearly point out some of the existing processes which are denying people voice.

The opening quote of the Report, from Pope Francis, reads: ‘Human rights are violated not only by terrorism, repression or assassination, but also by unfair economic structures that create huge inequalities’. What are these unfair economic structures which reduce people’s opportunities to live flourishing human lives? The Report does not dwell on them. There is a mention of the scope of illicit financial flows, which is estimated to deprive countries of tax revenues at a rate of about 100 billion US dollars a year (p. 119). There is also mention of the statistics that ‘providing basic social security benefits to the world’s poor would cost less than 2% of global GDP’ (p.101). but there is no discussion as to why these resources are not allocated. Given the many references in the Report to the fact that half of the world’s workers do not have access to any type of social protection and are not covered by any form of labour legislation or regulation, it is surprising that there is so little analysis as to *why* this is so.

There is a close connection between what institutions can be or do and how people who construct that institution or constitute it, relate to each other. In other words, how well institutions are functioning reflects to a large extent how well its constitutive elements are behaving. The institution of the police is not able to guarantee public security if its members

engage in corrupt practices. A police force where a number of its members are involved in the car stealing business or drug trafficking is not very effective in protecting citizens from criminal behaviour.

A particular tragic feature of institutional or structural malfunctioning is its irresponsiveness to individual actions. When a number of individuals engage in certain human interaction, they can construct a structure which becomes irresponsible to a change in individual action. It is not because one individual policeman refuses a bribe that a corrupt police force will become more transparent. It is not because some individual bankers decide to make all their investment ethical and not engage in financial speculation that the global financial system will be more stable. It is not because some European citizens commit themselves to live sustainably that European economies will no longer produce beyond natural capacity. Structural malfunctioning, in the sense of human interaction being structured in such a way as being detrimental to the well-functioning of people and ecosystems, requires a transformation of the rules, norms and regulations which govern and structure human interaction. This requires collective action to build social competences and make institutions function well.

The Report talks about the importance of ‘responsive institutions’ (p. 102) and the need for state institutions to become more responsive to those who live in conditions of poverty and vulnerability. It argues that those who have the power to make decisions need to understand their situation and ‘have their interests at heart’ (p. 102). Yet, it does not give a prominent place to the voices of these people. There is a personal account of Stephen Hawking (p. 77) and how social competences and structural well-functioning have enabled him ‘to be and do what he had reasons to value’, despite his severe disability. But what about special contributions from the very subjects of the Report, those who lack social protection or are multi-dimensionally poor? This is a fourth area of a human development perspective on policy which the Report treats in an incomplete manner.

On making institutions responsive

Social competences do not come naturally, they are deconstructed and reconstructed through human actions. Structural malfunctionings can be transformed. Given that the 2014 Report makes many references to the problem of informal work and lack of social protection, the story of the struggles of Argentine informal economy workers could help shed some light on how a group of excluded people is concretely creating the social competences which establish the very conditions for valuable functionings.

There is an estimated 7.2 million informal sector workers in Argentina, or about 46.8 per cent of the working population (ILO 2014), of which only about 20,000, or 0.3 per cent of the total informal workforce, are estimated to benefit from social protection to date.¹² Ensuring labour protection so that workers can be and do what they have reason to value – such living in suitable housing without overcrowding, living a healthy life and having health insurance and protection against labour accidents, sending their children to school, planning the future and no longer living day by day – requires the building of some social competences and transforming some current institutional malfunctionings.

The first small gains to reduce the vulnerability of Argentine informal economy through social competences started with the waste pickers of the federal capital city of Buenos Aires in 2002. Collecting waste on the streets had since the mid-1970s been an illegal activity, making police bribery thrive. Given the significant increase of waste pickers in the aftermath of the December 2001 crisis, the criminalization of waste picking became a pressing problem. Waste pickers formed a representative organization and brought the problem for discussion in the city governing assembly. The law which made waste picking illegal was abolished. The abolition of the law facilitated the forming of cooperatives and the elimination of intermediaries. Instead of being in a relation of dependence with middlemen, waste pickers were now able sell directly their goods to the company and negotiate a fair price.

After this small gain, the waste pickers became bolder in taking more actions. In 2008, the agreement they had with train companies to reserve one carriage for them in their commute between their homes and workplace, was abruptly ended. To mark their discontent, they occupied public squares and generated a social conflict with the public authorities who tried to evict them by force. The impasse between both parties was overcome when information came to light that the city government was paying large sums of money to a private contractor to recycle much less waste than them. After dialogue, an agreement was concluded. The contract with the private contractor was terminated and the money redirected to subsidize their work. The local government now provides uniforms and designated recycling centres to make their work safer. Another part of the negotiation was the granting of labour accident insurance and the provision of child nurseries.

¹² Personal communication from Carolina Palacio, coordinator of the Confederation of Popular Economy Workers, September 2014. With thanks to Juan Grabois, Maria del Mar Murga and Carolina Palacio for facilitating the narrative in this section. Information about the Confederation can be found at <http://www.ctepargentina.org>. See Chen (2014) for a discussion on informal sector workers and their lack of social protection worldwide.

Thanks to a decade of organizing, a mafia-dominated activity with poor technology is slowly being transformed into a cooperative system of urban recycling with appropriate technology, safe labour conditions, more decent and secure salary and reduced incidence of child labour. In the words of Sergio who was a pioneer of the movement: “When I was a cartonero,¹³ I started to get to know social activists who began to teach me to struggle for my rights, for the rights of those who were working and were discriminated against, so that they could work with a little bit more dignity. And we, the cartoneros, began to be recognized. The process was then moving forward. We started with 100, and today we are 3,000. We had many ups and downs. Obviously, in order to get to 3,000 we had to go through difficulties because there was a lot of discrimination. We continued to struggle and we wanted to teach people that they had to defend the rights of all these men and women who do not have a voice. We were lucky to have had good teachers, who taught us to struggle so that we could say ‘We are here, we are us and we are defending ourselves’. And well, like this, we continue to move forward.”¹⁴

In December 2011, the waste pickers of Buenos Aires joined with informal workers from other sectors of the economy, such as garment workers, motorcyclists, street vendors, stall holders, craftsmen and women and small farmers, to form the Confederation of the Popular Economy Workers (CTEP in its Spanish acronyms). The CTEP has created an integral health programme, which includes a mutual insurance scheme, medical and dental consultations and health prevention. In collaboration with a university, it offers a higher education certificate so that workers can acquire skills to understand better their work environment and act for change.

For the time being, it is a civil association and has not been granted union status yet. To construct a platform for the voices of informal economy workers to be included in decision-making processes would make a huge difference to their lives. In the words of Claudia, an urban recycler who went to Geneva for a conference on the transformation of the informal economy at the International Labour Office in July 2014, ‘Nobody can represent a worker like me, no union, no business, no government. I do not want to be a second or third class worker, but a worker like any other worker’.¹⁵ It would be a welcome addition to the subsequent Human Development Reports to include the voices of those who are striving to eliminate the structural malfunctionings which are the root causes of their vulnerabilities. They are the ones who are trying the best they can, in often harsh realities, to build the social competences so that they can be or do what they have reason to value.

¹³ A cartonero is the Argentinian Spanish for waste picker.

¹⁴ Sergio’s interview can be listened at <http://hosting.soundslides.com/tcfcz/>.

¹⁵ Personal communication, December 2014.

Concluding remarks

The Human Development Reports have been over the last 25 years an extremely important source of information about how well people were doing across the world, whether they have opportunities to live creative, healthy and productive lives. With a copy of the 2014 Report in one's hands, one can immediately grasp the vast inequalities across the world. In 2013, life expectancy in Sierra Leone was just above 45. It was above 81 in Norway. The maternal mortality rate was 6 per 100,000 life births in the Netherlands, and 800 in Burundi. A citizen of Canada emitted on average in 2010 14.6 tonnes of carbon emissions, the one of Sierra Leone 0.1. Australians, the number 2 high human development achievers, had 95.4% of their energy in 2012 coming from fossil fuels, compared to 84.7% of Iceland's use of energy coming from renewable resources.

Like in previous years, the 2014 Report is an invaluable contribution to the global public debate on inequality and global justice. This assessment has argued that its contribution could be made stronger by re-examining four aspects of a human development perspective on policy. First, it could replace the language of 'choices' with that of secure functionings or 'valuable beings and doings'. The jargon of capabilities and functionings may not be user friendly but a return to original meaning could avoid some 'lost in translation' misfortunes. Second, it could address the human-nature connection in a much bolder way and pay greater care to the high-energy consuming lifestyles of the high human development achievers. Reviving the debate on how to measure human progress is not superfluous when the earth shouts so loudly that she can no longer cope with the type of progress humans inflicted upon her over the last two centuries. Third, bringing the question of social competences as integral component of the functioning of individual lives invites for a much more explicit discussion of power inequality between groups and the representation mechanisms which people who live in conditions of vulnerability have to make their voices heard. Finally, the Human Development Reports could become a space where the voices of those who are excluded could be expressed, their stories heard, and their ongoing journey to build social competences towards a less unequal and more sustainable world shared. Statistics gather evidence, but inspiring stories move others to action.

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