

Frequently Asked Questions

2020 Human Development Report

‘The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene’

1. If people take away one thing from the report, what should it be?

We are in an unprecedented moment in the history of our planet, with warning signs flashing red. But we have the choice to use human development to unlock the social, economic, and environmental transformations needed to rebalance our social and planetary systems, so that humans and the planet thrive together.

2. What is new?

The report overhauls how we define and measure human development and outlines how we can use human development in the Anthropocene to change our current trajectory of mutually reinforcing planetary and social imbalance.

It argues that we must move beyond seeking to solve discreet problems with singular solutions. Instead, we must connect the dots and equip ourselves to navigate complex, interconnected social and ecological systems. The need for this is illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was both created and has been maintained by planetary and social imbalance.

This is *not* just another sustainability report that summarizes well-known problems and policy solutions. Instead, it focuses on how we can – and must – successfully navigate this new geological era by expanding human development in balance with the planet.

Planetary Pressures-Adjusted Human Development Index (PHDI) is a signalling device to guide this transformation.

3. What is the Anthropocene and how is it relevant to human development?

The Anthropocene is the new geological age scientist argue we now find ourselves in, whereby human activity is shaping the planet, to a greater extent than the planet shapes human activity.

The Anthropocene is relevant because, whether we like it or not, it is now the framing for human development - the choice is ours whether we consider it a constraint or an opportunity.

The pressures humans are collectively putting on our planetary systems – the pressures that created the Anthropocene – are manifested not just as climate change and biodiversity loss but in pollution, ocean acidification, land degradation and more.

When the Anthropocene started is a matter of ongoing debate among experts, but there is broad agreement that we are now in it and that the impact of human behaviour on the planet is greater than it has ever been.

The strain on our planet mirrors the strain facing our societies. Social and planetary imbalances reinforce each other in a vicious cycle. But, importantly, the Anthropocene also gives people the power to demand change – to set things straight between themselves and the planet.

4. Are you saying that human development is bad for the planet?

The report calls for a *reimagining* of the human development journey. This isn't a choice between people and trees – if nature cannot flourish, human development will be limited.

Human development does not have to be bad for the planet. But until now, human development has relied too heavily on fossil fuels and linear models of consumption.

Options have remained confined to a set of narrow, well-trodden, but ultimately unsustainable paths. However, alternative models are available and necessary.

New ways of doing things require new ways of measuring human development against its impact on the planet. To achieve this, the Planetary Pressure Adjusted Human Development Index (PHDI) gives us a broader view and a *new frontier* against which to measure progress and incentivise change.

Far from arguing against human development, the report argues that reframing the human development journey in the Anthropocene has the potential to break the cycle of social and planetary imbalance – a cycle that currently threatens our long-term survival.

5. Doesn't this approach just punish countries with low human development and let countries with high human development off the hook for centuries of planetary abuse?

The report makes it clear that the planetary and social imbalances we face globally are a threat to every country, and that human development that is not in balance with the planet is not really development at all. To that end, every country must be transformed if we are going to survive and thrive in the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene offers us the chance to choose a new human development journey in balance with the planet, rather than relying on old models that have caused so much harm. Ultimately, countries that forge a new, sustainable path will be stronger, more resilient and more prosperous.

For low development countries, the route to sustainable growth will face different barriers from high development ones, as they will not have to dismantle harmful existing structures and systems. The Anthropocene provides these countries with an opportunity to leapfrog models of development with rapidly diminishing returns and aim for systems that allow more people to thrive.

The report also recognises that the current international system is incapable of dealing with existential threats on this scale. It calls for a renewed commitment to and investment in multilateralism, with better monitoring and enforcement so that the actions of a few countries do not limit the choices of all.

6. The shift to renewable sources of energy seems to be happening and technology is improving all the time – do we really need to be so worried?

The Anthropocene forces us to recognise that it is not enough to look at planetary imbalance in silos. If we fail to see these challenges as interdependent, and simply take a crisis management approach that focuses on finding one solution to one problem, we will forfeit our chance to achieve human development that does not cost the world.

Renewable sources of energy will not solve all our challenges. Reducing CO₂ is crucial to preventing planetary imbalance but insufficient on its own. Other material cycles and flows – nitrogen, phosphorus and other minerals and materials are also critical.

In fact, cleaner energy sources often rely on the extraction of minerals that are energy-intensive to extract and cannot be recycled. This is why we must look beyond simple solutions and make systemic changes instead.

Technology can bring us much progress but technological advances don't happen in a vacuum – they are influenced by social, economic and environmental processes. We – individuals, governments, businesses – must make a choice to deploy technology as an equalising force.

This requires governments and other investors to think much longer term by investing in new technologies to make them competitive with cheap incumbent ones.

Of course, the shift towards solar energy is still important and should be incentivised. This is also true of many nature-based solutions from around the world – the real challenge is to take them to scale.

7. What does the report say about population growth? Isn't that the major cause of planetary pressure?

The structures, systems and patterns of consumption we have created are much more of a concern than the growth in population.

People created the Anthropocene, but we are also our only route to navigating it successfully. By using the human development approach to unlock human potential, we can empower everyone to be a steward of the planet.

Education of women and girls alongside economic empowerment contributed to lowering fertility rates in India and Bangladesh. This is an example of how putting people at the centre of development by expanding human freedoms can empower them to make choices that change unsustainable patterns of behaviour.

Therefore, history demonstrates expansion of human freedoms, not coercive attempts to cap consumption or population, are the key to development that is in balance with the planet.

The report also notes that, while the total global population is still growing, growth *rates* are falling. Recent drops in fertility rates suggesting that the total population may start shrinking this century.

8. What new insight does the report give on the links between climate change, inequality and poverty?

The report emphasises that inequality – in wealth, in power, in distribution of resources – within and between countries is both driven by and exacerbates planetary imbalance.

As the challenges related to planetary imbalance become more embedded and harder to solve or their consequences harder to bear, enhanced capabilities – freedoms for people to be and do desirable things such as to access high-quality higher education and modern-day technologies – are critical tools with which to empower people to solve them.

Disempowered people do not have the choice to change harmful practices - they are missing the privilege of taking meaningful action in favour of the future. For example, poor farmers do not have the luxury of leaving a field fallow or choosing less harmful fertilizers.

A rising tide does not necessarily lift all boats. Efforts to tackle certain aspects of planetary imbalance without also tackling social imbalances leave existing inequalities in place and in some instances make them worse, which is why we think and act systemically – not in silos.

9. What does the Anthropocene have to do with the COVID-19 pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic is a prime example of the types of challenges humans will increasingly face in the Anthropocene. The virus, a zoonotic pathogen, is a result of the strain humans are putting on the planet, in this case likely by encroaching on wildlife.

The social and economic consequences of the pandemic are also exacerbated by and exacerbating existing inequalities – those at the bottom of the pyramid suffer the harshest fallout.

However, COVID-19 has also demonstrated we can respond and adapt to challenges faster than previously considered possible. This means the scale of behaviour change needed to tackle the climate crisis can happen and quickly so.

10. It is all very well talking about change but how can it happen?

Human activity can harm nature, but it can also regenerate it. Our challenge is to create and sustain positive cycles while preventing and ending negative spirals.

The report outlines three mechanisms for collective change:

- **Social norms and values**
 - As we seek to expand agency and empower people through human development, we must also establish new norms that give greater weight to planetary balance and sustainability.

- Though social norms can seem fixed or slow to change, that is not always the case. Examples of changes to social norms include tobacco use, recycling and same-sex partnerships. Under COVID-19, actions such as mask-wearing and physical distancing became social norms almost overnight.
- **Incentives and regulation**
 - Incentives and regulations can be used to promote or deter action, helping bridge the gap between behaviours and values.
 - Incentives can also help expand the choices available to people, considering that limited options are often a barrier to behaviour change, especially for the poorest and most disadvantaged.
- **Nature-based solutions**
 - These can create a virtuous cycle between human development and planetary health by generating and supporting actions that protect, sustainably manage and restore ecosystems.
 - Examples of this are already in action across the world – urban green spaces have a cooling effect in cities, vegetation can prevent or slow landslides and management of ecosystems in seas, wetlands and rivers can boost fish stocks and reduce the risk of flooding. What’s needed now is the ambition to grow these nature-based solutions to scale.

11. Why does the report advocate for mechanisms of change without prescribing policy recommendations?

The scale of transformation required to ease the strain on our planet needs to be framed much more broadly than individual recommendations grouped around specific actors.

By looking instead at mechanisms for change – which we have grouped as social norms and values, incentives and regulation, and nature-based solutions – we can specify multiple potential roles for each one of us, for governments, for financial markets, for political and civil society leaders.

This prevents a situation where we are pitting people against trees, or jobs against nature. Instead, it is about seeing how different approaches can be brought together to expand human freedoms in balance with the planet.

Rather than prescribe one solution, we encourage a diverse range of imaginative, problem-solving approaches, opening up the scope for productive deliberation and cross-pollination of ideas.

12. How much time do we have before it is too late?

There is already overwhelming evidence of the need to act very quickly.

But humanity’s collective inaction to prevent planetary imbalance isn’t due to a lack of evidence of information.

This report seeks to explore ways we can reframe human development to change the vicious cycle of social and planetary imbalance into a virtuous one.

A window of opportunity is still open and the COVID-19 pandemic proves how quickly transformations can happen.

13. Why is the report so academic and technical?

The Human Development Report always seeks to present a detailed and high-level analysis of the challenges and opportunities of our times.

This year, the report seeks to bring together in-depth concepts from the physical and social sciences, which required a certain amount of technical explanation to bridge knowledge gaps and ensure people of all disciplines were on the same page before detailing the challenges and opportunities.

14. The report advocates for new experimental metrics. Why? Is the existing HDI not valid?

The HDI has never claimed to measure all that was important in development. It remains a useful – and widely used - measure of people’s capabilities that is a more informative indicator of development than the GDP. But the HDI does not take account of our impacts on the planet.

The HDI was created as a device to help the public and political debate around development evolve by encouraging countries to measure their progress against a metric that is wider than income.

As we confront the Anthropocene, the 2020 Human Development Report argues that transformational change is required to ease pressures on the planet and redress social imbalances. To achieve this, there must once again be an ambitious reorientation of goals and choices. New goals, new choices and a new era all call for a new generation of human development metrics.