



Redirecting our impact on the planet

By Caitlin Wiesen

Resident representative in Vietnam
United Nations Development Programme

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Human Development Report, the flagship report from the UN Development Programme.

The ambition of the first report, published in 1990, was to shift the focus of development thinking to human capabilities rather than focus exclusively on economic growth. Increasing incomes is important, especially for the poor and vulnerable, but we also need access to quality healthcare and education to realise our full potential.

Vietnam's extraordinary achievement of joining the High Human Development group this year as a lower middle-income country demonstrates the importance of focusing on human capabilities while also striving for rapid economic growth. Vietnam's Human Development Index (HDI) since 1990 shows one of the fastest rates of improvement globally since the indicators were introduced.

The country has excelled at widening access to healthcare and education, especially in rural and remote areas, which has enabled the country to avoid a situation – common within the Asia-Pacific region – in which inequality rises with urbanisation and industrialisation.

However, these impressive achievements have come at the cost of high pressure on planetary systems. This is a global problem, not unique to Vietnam – and it is the focus of the 2020 report which launched in January.

The report, entitled “The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene,” rejects the idea



that we must choose between people and the planet, arguing for a transformation in the way that we live, work, consume, interact – and most important of all – how we produce and use energy.

The Anthropocene, or the Age of Humans, is the new geological age in which we live today, an era in which humans have fundamentally changed the planetary systems needed for life on earth.

COVID-19 is the latest warning that humanity has reached a precipice. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on human development, lowering the global HDI for the first time in 30 years.

But the pandemic and disruption it caused to our routines and practices, is also an opportunity to reset our relationship to the environment from exploitation to regeneration.

To illustrate the harmony between human development and the planet, the report introduces a new experimental lens to its HDI, which

for the last three decades has measured countries' health, education, and standard of living.

By adding two new metrics – CO₂ emissions and material footprint – the new index shows how the global development landscape changes when you consider the wellbeing of people alongside planetary pressures.

The results are stark: no country is currently achieving very high human development without straining planetary systems. In Vietnam, taking carbon emissions and material footprint into account lowers the national HDI by 5.7 per cent, from 0.704 to 0.664.

The impact is greater in richer countries. For example, Malaysia loses 13.7 per cent, China 11.6 per cent, and Thailand 7.9 per cent from its HDI because of high levels of carbon emissions.

Developing human capabilities without damaging the planet means working with and not against

nature. There is huge potential in actions that protect, sustainably manage, and restore ecosystems. Ventures like coastal management, reforestation, and urban green spaces can benefit both the natural world and local communities.

For example, we are working with the government, coastal communities, and the Green Climate Fund to plant and regenerate over 3,000 hectares of mangrove forests, which act as a buffer against storms and provide ecosystem resources that support local livelihoods.

There is also a need to change social norms and values to better balance people and the planet. This year has demonstrated how quickly entrenched behaviours can change when driven by necessity, whether on mask wearing or social distancing. Here, Vietnam's leadership and solidarity of the Vietnamese people have been critical to the success in containing the pandemic.

In just a generation, a similar

movement has happened globally on issues ranging from stigma around HIV/AIDS to reducing single use plastics.

Finally, incentives are essential tools to bridge the gap between behaviour and values. The right policies and regulations have a vital role to play. Rethinking government subsidies for the construction of coal-fired power plants and creating further incentives to attract investment options for renewable energy could make a significant difference to greening Vietnam's growth.

One of our recent studies indicates that enabling legislation would unblock a further \$15 billion of private sector investment in clean renewable energy.

Inequalities of power and opportunity within and between countries are important barriers to change. As we have experienced during the pandemic, unequal societies were less about to respond to the threat in a prompt and coherent manner, and the economic costs of the disease were borne disproportionately by the poor and vulnerable. The excellent performance of Vietnam in managing the crisis is partly due to relatively low levels of inequality compared to other countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

We are the first generation of the Anthropocene, an era in which, for the first time, human behaviour will determine the future of the planet. The choices that we make now will determine how our time will be remembered: as the era in which people continued to exploit nature long after it was clear that our actions were unsustainable; or as the turning point, when people decided to mobilise our power and knowledge for the good of people, and the planet.

The choice is ours to make. ■

