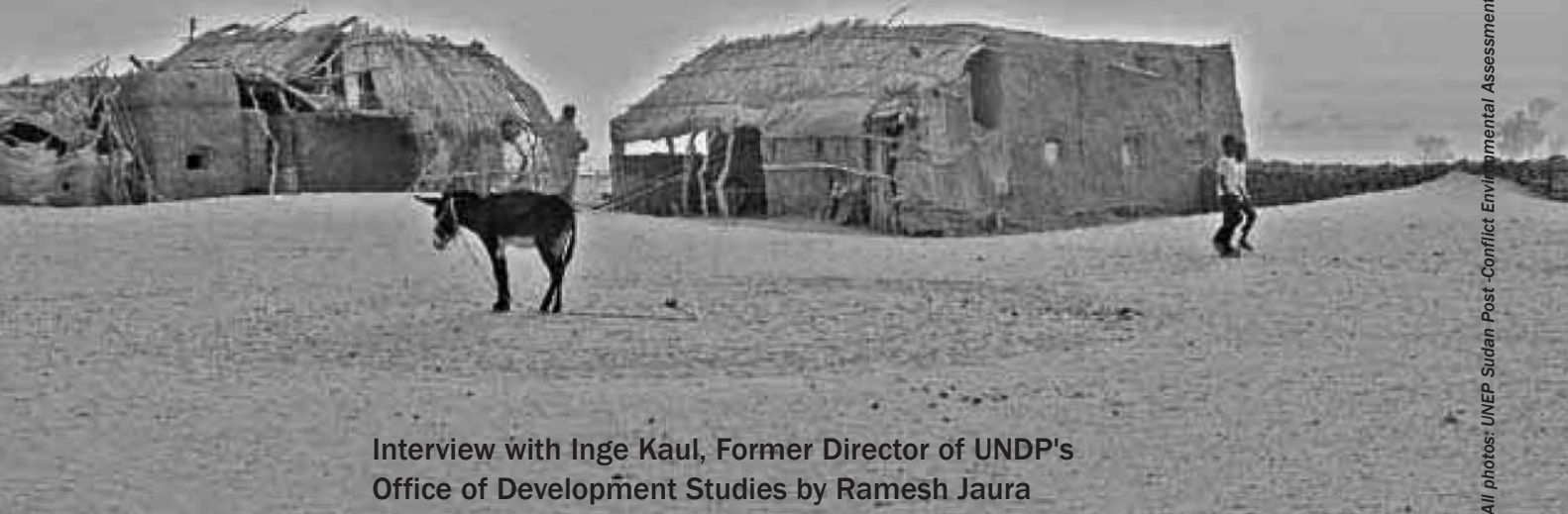


How the MDGs Could Curtail Development



All photos: UNEP Sudan Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment Project

Interview with Inge Kaul, Former Director of UNDP's Office of Development Studies by Ramesh Jaura

Some of the ways in which the MDGs are being pushed could actually limit development, says Inge Kaul, former director of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Office of Development Studies. She says the millennium development goals (MDGs) have "often been interpreted as meaning that what is to be 'delivered' to the poor is some health, some education, some water, and so on." This is a curtailment of human development, she says, because human development should be about enabling the poor to earn a living that allows them to access social services and other opportunities that will, ultimately, translate into the achievement of the MDGs.

Kaul was director of UNDP Development Report Office from 1989 to mid-1995. She headed the organisation's Office of Development Studies (ODS) up to the end of 2005, and left UNDP in November 2006. She is now adjunct professor at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, and advisor to various multilateral agencies.

IPS: Agriculture is for the first time since 1982 the subject of a World Development Report. What do you think has prompted the World Bank to turn the spotlight on agriculture in its latest report?

Inge Kaul: There seem to be three closely inter-related main reasons for the renewed attention to agricultural development. One, as economic historians and other scholars have pointed out policymaking moves in swings - from more public intervention into economic affairs to less and back to more. Until the 1980s many countries had a strongly state-controlled agricultural sector. Then came the swing towards privatization and liberalization. In part, this was a desirable shift, because some of the earlier state interventions had led to distortions, including distortions with negative effects for the poor. Yet, we now realize that the pendulum may in some instances have

swung too far to the other - the private - side. In order to foster the productivity of small, poor farmers and promote food security as an integral part of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) added public support is warranted.

Second, important innovations have happened in the field of agricultural technology, which still need to be explored in terms of the opportunities they offer but also in terms of the potential risks they present. If studies on these issues are to take the concerns of the poor into account, added public support for pro-poor agricultural research would be needed, including added support to institutions like the Consultative Group on International Agricultural research (CGIAR) for which the World Bank acts as a major donor and manager. Third and perhaps most importantly, is the urgency of developing policy responses for mitigating and adapting to the risks and consequences of climate change. Many of these policy responses will concern agriculture in poor developing countries - the agriculture in these countries as a contributor to global energy security as well as a provider of global food security.

IPS: Back in 1990 UNDP published its first Human Development Report (HDR). It defined human development as "the process of enlarging people's choices" Isn't agricultural development a part of that process?

Inge Kaul: This is correct. Adequate, broad-based and sustainable agricultural development is a critical ingredient of human development - of people having the opportunity to earn a decent income, to be well-fed and healthy, and hence, also able to invest in their education and ability to innovate and propel their own future well-being.

IPS: Until now 17 HDRs have been put out and the 18th is expected soon. You have been associated with

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these since the very beginning. What were your and the UNDP's objectives to turn to the public with such reports?

Inge Kaul: One of the main purposes of launching the concept of human development was to draw the world's attention to the fact that, as Armatya Sen would say, "income alone is not the sum-total of human life". Much depends on how income is being translated into such human capabilities as people's being able to live longer, be healthier and access and acquire knowledge and information.

IPS: Not a single report has focussed on agriculture. How would you explain that?

Inge Kaul: Although none of the reports has explicitly addressed agriculture, several reports have touched upon related themes when discussing issues like the nature of economic growth, employment, technology development, water, and as the forthcoming Human Development report, HDR 2007 will do, global climate change. But, looking at recent trends in human development, I would - from the vantage point of hindsight - agree that we should perhaps have paid more attention to the topic of agriculture.

The fact that the HDR did not do so may be due to the narrowing of the concept of human development that has - unfortunately - been introduced by the focus on the MDGs. It is certainly good to have a focus on well-defined goals and targets. But the MDGs have often been interpreted as meaning that what is to be "delivered" to the poor is some health, some education, some water, and so on.

This is a curtailment of human development, because what human development should be about is the following: As a result of enhanced say, agricultural development, science and technology, infrastructure development, or a freer and fairer multilateral trade regime and international financial architecture the poor will be enabled to earn a living that allows them to access social services and other opportunities that will, ultimately, translate into the achievement of the MDGs.

Put differently, the MDGs should not be seen as something that ought to be delivered to the poor but as the end-result of a multi-faceted, broad-based pro-poor development process. Yet much of this development process has fallen out of the discussion on the MDGs. And, to return to your question, recent HDRs have to some extent perhaps also succumbed to this narrowing of our understanding of development.

IPS: To what extent have the HDRs contributed to "human development"?

Inge Kaul: I would argue that the HDRs have had a major impact on human development. There are very few people today who would argue that GNP (gross national product) can serve as the sole or the most important indicator of development and progress. It is quite widely accepted that development must also serve people - and more than that, that people ought to have a voice in matters that concern them.

Yet, while the HDR has helped to make extreme human deprivation less acceptable, it may not yet have achieved in fostering human development -- in actually putting people at the centre. We witness growing inequity - while of course, accepting that the poor should not be too poor lest the current process of globalization lack legitimacy and political acceptability. But, in order to change global macro trends one needs to have a lot of patience and insistence. Many of today's problems have been in the making for a long time - and may, in order to be corrected, also need some time. This is not a call for



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complacency but a call for persistence. Any "good" goal that hasn't been achieved as yet needs to be pursued further.

IPS: Have these reports in any way helped shape international development cooperation policies and programmes?

Inge Kaul: Yes, the HDRs have to some extent shaped international cooperation policies and programmes. But they have done so perhaps in an unintended and slightly perverse way. Each year the press reports focus on the fact that there is still so much poverty in the world, and that the distance between the world's poor and the world's rich gets wider and wider. For many bilateral and multilateral aid agencies this is often a reason to say "You see, we continue to be needed." *Yet, I think, the time has come to hold aid agencies more accountable and to ask "How come that despite all your efforts poverty reduction is not advancing faster?"*

Some development experts do raise this question. For example, the Center for Global Development in Washington, led by Nancy Birdsall, is doing an excellent job in coming back to this question of what contributes to the persistence of poverty. The Center has, among other things, developed an index that measures the coherence between donors' aid and non-aid policies like foreign trade or financial flows. The index shows that at times the non-aid hand of donors takes from developing countries much more than aid hand gives. Just think of the costs of industrial countries' agricultural subsidies to developing countries. One can only hope that with the renewed focus on agriculture such coherence issues also receive again more attention.

IPS: Would you agree that after 17 HDRs - and another expected soon - it is time to pause and

review what these reports have achieved? And also examine whether current multilateral development cooperation policies and projects comply with the human development index criteria?

Inge Kaul: I agree, it would be good to reflect on what the past HDRs have been able to achieve and not achieve; and where and why they may have even had undesirable, unintended consequences. Yet, I would also say that one should not pause in the sense of interrupting the report series.

As even our discussion shows there are still many issues that would need to be addressed. Also, many development scholars and policymakers around the

world eagerly await each year the report - in order to see the latest, most up-to-date statistics. So, yes, by all means, let's undertake a comprehensive, rigorous assessment of the HDRs. But let's also recognize that human development is still a fragile notion.

Extreme poverty is no longer perhaps being tolerated as much as it was in the past. Yet, even in richer countries we are still far from people being at the center of development. Moreover, we have to rethink many development strategies - in

rich and poor countries - so as to adjust them to today's open, globalizing world. The irony in today's global policy debates is that we all talk about poverty reduction and development. But then, when development succeeds like in China or India, many policymakers and their constituencies in the industrial countries also get nervous -- and competitive. Maybe, a focus of some of the future HDRs could be how to combine the development of developing countries with continued and sustained development (albeit perhaps of a different quality) in industrial countries.



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