BOOK REVIEW

No. of pages: 372
Publisher: United Nations Development Programme, New York

Whither the Promise? Navigating the Crossroads Between Consensus and Concrete Action

Adigun Agbaje
Department of Political Science, University of Ibadan

There is a clear and present danger that the development community, for whom the Human Development Report 2005 is largely meant, may indeed erroneously approach the report with a jaded palate. It is important that this danger be averted to avoid great disservice to the labour of love and dedicated attention to detail that has obviously been invested in the preparation of this excellent report. More important, is the fact that approaching this report in the right frame of mind would provide us all with the opportunity to encounter the sober reality of decades long on rhetoric and short on action on international cooperation over aid, trade and security in the context of deepening poverty and inequality among the peoples, countries and regions of our world.

Perhaps the most important duty of this review is to exhort, cajole and, if possible, forcibly insist that all of us, governmental and non-governmental bodies, and all others in-between, read this report in full. For this is one report that is different from others. It is sombre in content yet uplifting and beautiful in language. Neither provocative nor shocking in design, it nonetheless provokes, unsettles and shocks. The challenge remains how to get those in development policy and practice, in and outside of government, busy as they all seem to be at all times, to read the report.

It seems to me that what the report has done excellently well in the discharge of its mandate for 2005 is to invite all of us to take a break from everyday immersion in, and the attendant distractions of the mundane details of our lives. This would enable us to spare a thought for the travails of our world and, in the process, re-connect with humanity and our communities in a manner that transforms episodic and random pangs of conscience to a more or less permanent platform for interventions to optimize human development. The report starts out on this enterprise by shocking us out of our settled mode. It leaves us in the grips of deep and powerful emotions at once liberating and frustrating, energizing and demobilizing, full of hope in a context of obvious hopelessness, invoking a sense of déjà vu while conveying the urgent message that things just do not have to remain the depressing way they have often been in regard of issues of aid, trade and security in our troubled world.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) deserves commendation for yet another agenda-setting report on the state of human development around the world. Since 1990, when the organization issued its first Report, it has sought annually to explore the interface of its newly introduced concept of human development with such diverse issues as gender, economic growth, poverty, consumption level, globalization, human rights, technology, democracy, UN’s millennium development goals (MDGs), and cultural liberty. The 2005 Report, titled ‘International cooperation at a crossroads: Aid, trade and security in an unequal world’, is yet another milestone in the UNDP’s evolving tradition of setting the pace in matters of human development. According to the Foreword to the Report:
Building on the powerful foundation laid during the report’s first decade, when successive human development reports introduced and fleshed out the concept of human development, the Human Development Report has steadily widened the intellectual frontiers of human development in the new millennium. And that shift has been increasingly mirrored in development practice through work by UNDP and its many partners on the ground.

In addition to introducing and popularizing the concept of human development as well as policies and practices germane to its attainment, the UNDP has, over the years, enriched development discourse and practice, from the local community to the global arena, with its four composite indices for measuring progress in critical areas of development. These indices are: the human development index (HDI), the gender-related development index (GDI), the gender empowerment measure (GEM), and the human poverty index (HPI).

The 2005 Report specifically addresses the progress recorded so far, with respect to the millennium declaration made five years ago by the countries of the world through the United Nations. In the declaration, the countries pledged ‘to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty’. A deadline of 2015 has been set for achieving certain targets known as the millennium development goals (MDGs) in such areas as: the eradication of extreme hunger and poverty; the achievement of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women; reduction of child mortality and improvement of maternal health; combatting HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental stability and sustainable access to safe drinking water and sanitation; and the evolution of a global partnership for development, which will include the reformation of aid and trade in a context that gives special attention to the needs of the poorest countries of the world.

Conceding the fact that ‘there is more to development than the MDGs’, the 2005 Report yet insists that MDGs ‘provide a crucial benchmark for measuring progress towards the creation of a new, more just, less impoverished and less insecure world order’. In anticipation of a meeting of the UN in September 2005 to review progress made on the MDGs in the first five years and to chart a course for the next decade (up to the 2015 deadline), the report offers insights of a seminal nature into the past, the present and the future. It notes the progress made since 2000 in the areas of fighting poverty and conducting more visible global campaigns to relegate poverty to the past. It warns, however, that there is still little cause for celebration and outlines ‘the scale of the challenge facing the world at the start of the 10-year countdown to 2015’. On this, it identifies the different roles for the national governments both of developing countries and of rich countries in what it calls the evolving global partnership bargain, underscoring the need for international cooperation.

The report discusses what it calls ‘the three pillars of cooperation’ — development assistance in the form of international aid, international trade, and security — each of which is ‘in urgent need of renovation’. Hence, on international aid, the report notes that:

*International aid is a key investment in human development. Returns to that investment can be measured in the human potential unleashed by averting avoidable sickness and deaths, educating all children, overcoming gender inequalities and creating the conditions for sustained economic growth. Development assistance suffers from two problems: chronic underfinancing and poor quality. There have been improvements on both fronts. But much remains to be done to close the MDG financing gaps and improve the value of money."

With regard to trade, it observes that:

*Under the right conditions, trade can be a powerful catalyst for human development. The Doha ‘Development Round’ of World Trade Organization (WTO) talks, launched in 2001, provided rich country governments with an opportunity to create those..."
conditions. Four years on, nothing of substance has been achieved. Rich country trade policies continue to deny poor countries and poor people a fair share of global prosperity – and they fly in the face of millennium declaration. More than aid, trade has the potential to increase the share of the world’s poorest countries and people in global prosperity. Limiting that potential through unfair trade policies is inconsistent with a commitment to the MDGs. More than that, it is unjust and hypocritical.

On security, the report offers the following sober perspective in which it notes that:

Violent conflict blights the lives of hundreds of millions of people. It is a source of systematic violations of human rights and a barrier to progress towards the MDGs. The nature of conflict has changed, and new threats to collective security have emerged. In an increasingly interconnected world, the threats posed by a failure to prevent conflict, or to seize opportunities for peace, inevitably cross national borders. More effective international cooperation could help to remove the barrier to MDG progress, created by violent conflict, creating the conditions for accelerated human development and real security.

As indicated earlier, the report calls for the renovation of each of these pillars. This is to be done simultaneously – for, according to the Report, ‘failure in any one area will undermine the foundations for future progress’. It observes that:

More effective rules in international trade will count for little in countries where violent conflict blocks opportunities to participate in trade. Increased aid without fairer trade rules will deliver suboptimal results. And peace without the prospects for improved human welfare and poverty reduction that can be provided through aid and trade will remain fragile.

The 372-page report presents an exhaustive, incisive, balanced, technical, but extremely readable description and analysis of the issues at stake in a general overview and in five chapters on the state of human development, inequality and human development, aid for the 21st century, international trade, and violent conflict. These are illustrated with 37 boxes, seven tables, 69 figures, a special contribution on the challenges for post-conflict reconstruction, as indicated by lessons from Afghanistan, and a map on child mortality. All these are backed up by a section on human development indicators, comprising 33 tables, to provide data on human development, income, poverty, demographic trends, commitment to health, water, sanitation and nutrition status, inequalities in maternal and child health, leading health crises and risks, progress and setbacks in survival, commitment to education in terms of public spending, literacy and enrollment, diffusion and creation of technology, economic performance, trade structure and responsibilities in trade, aid and debt relief, flows of aid, private capital and debt, priorities in public spending, and unemployment in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.

Other tables in the report present data on energy and consumption, refugees and armaments, victims of crime, gender-related development index, gender empowerment measure, gender inequality in education and economic activity, gender, work and time allocation, women’s political participation, and the status of major international instruments on human and labour rights, among others, for countries and groups of countries around the world.

Before I conclude this review, it is pertinent to address Nigeria’s location in all this. It is instructive to note that the 2005 Report ranks Nigeria 158th of 177 countries in its human development index. The report ranks Seychelles Africa’s best performer, at the 51st position; Niger, at the 177th position, is Africa’s (and the world’s) least performer. Also, in life expectancy at birth, Nigeria is ranked 165th of 177 countries; 121st in combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment; 155th in GDP per capita; 123rd (of 140 countries) in terms of building the
capabilities of women, and 145th in terms of the number of seats in the legislature occupied by women, among others. I believe that, although there is room for disputations on the methodology and accuracy of the data, these figures should be perceived as symptoms of challenges and not of pathologies that defy cure, or as instruments/causes for contestation about reality. It is unacceptable for Nigeria to remain in its current, obviously parlous state, despite the resources at its disposal. What is required, as the report rightly observes in its broad sweep of the global terrain, is a sensitive and innovative policy intervention at the local and global levels, working together, rather than at cross purposes, to tackle crucial issues of aid, trade and security.

In conclusion, I am happy to note the coincidence of the public presentation of the Human Development Report 2005 with a scheduled meeting of world leaders at the UN in September 2005 to review the progress towards the millennium development goals (MDGs) and chart a more assured path to the attainment of the goals by 2015. That meeting has come and gone, leaving little concrete progress in its wake. Against this background, I share the report’s concern for the need to urgently and ‘decisively resolve bottlenecks currently retarding the pace and scale’ of the march toward these goals in the next decade and beyond in areas of aid, trade and security.

I must, therefore, end this review by reiterating the report’s warning and plea to all those engaged in development policy and practice at various levels – governmental, extra-governmental, non-governmental, local, regional and global – that:

When historians of human development look back at 2005, they will view it as a turning point. . . . Having set the bar in the Millennium Declaration, the world’s governments could set a course that will reshape globalization, give renewed hope to millions of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people and create the conditions for shared prosperity and security. The business as usual alternatively will lead towards a world tarnished by mass poverty, divided by deep inequalities and threatened by shared insecurities. In rich and poor countries alike, future generations will pay a heavy price for the failures of political leadership at this crossroads moment at the start of the twenty-first century.

If indeed it is divine to listen, it is even more divine to act.

Biographical Note

Adigun Agbaje is a professor in the Department of Political Science in the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.