Human Well-Being and Capabilities

Sophie Plagerson
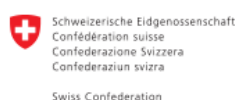
Organizing Partners

From Science to Practice: Research and Knowledge to Achieve the SDGs is a project coordinated by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPI), the Think Tank Hub, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Switzerland and the SDG Lab, and funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

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Box 1. Science to Practice: Research and Knowledge to Achieve the SDGs – About the Project

Scientific research can make a critical contribution to addressing global challenges and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, translating the knowledge that comes from research into action remains a complicated task. Research often fails to find its way into policy-making circles due to a number of technical, normative, cultural, political, institutional and financial barriers.

With this in mind, a consortium of Geneva-based institutions has established a new channel through which research and knowledge from International Geneva and its global networks can amplify its impact on national and global policy making and help to achieve the SDGs.

Progress towards the goals is reviewed in July each year at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) that takes place in New York. Our process began therefore with a call to organizations to submit research related to three themes, covering the SDGs that will be reviewed at the 2021 HLPF:

• Human well-being and capabilities
• Sustainable and just economies
• Food systems and nutrition patters

After receiving around 100 submissions from a broad range of organizations throughout Geneva and their international networks, three synthesis reports were drafted that brought together the research submitted and situated this new evidence against the state of the art .

This report is the first step in a larger process to institutionalize this research-to-practice channel over the long term and bring more knowledge-making bodies into the process, to ensure policy making is informed by relevant, timely, interdisciplinary research.

This task is more important today than ever, as we begin the decade of action to achieve the SDGs in the face of economic, health and environmental crises, typified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Such challenges demand we make use of all the knowledge we have available to us. Carving out a clear path for science to play a central role in policy making is an essential first step.

Summary

Scientific research can make a critical contribution to addressing global challenges and achieving the SDGs. As part of an effort to improve processes of research uptake in policy making, this report synthesizes research submitted by Geneva-based institutions and their global networks to the project From Science to Practice: Research and Knowledge to Achieve the SDGs on the theme of **human well-being and capabilities**. The report presents qualitative and quantitative evidence contributions, including a variety of case studies, in the context of current policy-relevant knowledge on SDG progress. The findings underline individual, relational and collective dimensions of well-being, as well as the linkages between different social, health and environmental interventions. In spite of severe setbacks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the scientific knowledge base provides many examples of immediate and longer-term responses which can expand and create sustainable freedoms, in the direction of greater human well-being for all. Policy recommendations highlighted in this report include the equitable and inclusive expansion of access to health, education and social protection; improvements in governance to ensure security against intra-state conflict, build state capacity, broaden inclusion and progressively realize human rights; wider and better access to technology and information; environmental action; and partnerships which expand the inclusiveness of decision making.

Sophie Plagerson is a Visiting Associate Professor at the Centre for Social Development in Africa at the University of Johannesburg. She is currently based in the Netherlands and working as an independent consultant.

1. Introduction – The Freedom Crisis of 2020-21

Human well-being and freedom go hand in hand (Box 2). Yet in recent months, through Covid-related measures intended to protect our physical well-being, such as lockdowns, curfews and travel bans, many of us have experienced the temporary curtailment of our freedoms to study, work, earn, socialize and experience life as we would like to. Tragically in many contexts, the restrictions have exposed and exacerbated a pre-existing freedom crisis that goes much deeper and precedes the pandemic outbreak, revealing that the lack of opportunity to attend school, to receive health care, to eat nutritious food, and to live a life free from violence are the daily, enduring and devastating reality for many millions of people. In the throes of the pandemic, political leaders have found themselves making agonizing decisions between lives and livelihoods, between health and education, universal and indivisible freedoms that had not previously been so distressingly pitted against one another. These dilemmas bring to the fore deep questions about the essence of freedom, whose freedom matters and who should decide.

The SDGs provide a welcome compass to navigate these questions. They sharpen the focus on the objectives and targets to aim for, with human well-being as the plumbline (Box 3). They soberly remind us that expanding real freedoms for all is a complex journey, and that it requires partnerships between governments, businesses, and international and local civil society stakeholders. The SDGs promote carefully calibrated systems that expand interdependent economic, social and environmental freedoms in a sustainable manner (Hujo and Carter 2019). The SDGs attest that freedom is not attained if it is at the expense of others' present or future freedoms, especially women, children and many vulnerable groups who are systematically marginalized by contemporary social, political and economic systems. Similarly, they discredit any purported "freedom" if the price tag of opportunities for a few is greater inequality and environmental threats for the majority. The SDGs are rooted in the understanding that not only is expanding freedom the goal, but that it is also the route to attaining that goal, by supporting platforms for dialogue, giving voice to the marginalized, and investing in inclusive and transparent governance.

Box 2. Understanding human well-being and capabilities

The capability approach to human well-being is interested in what people are able to do, and in people's real opportunities to live a life they value (Robeyns 2017). Human well-being cannot be reduced to the measurement of individual incomes or GDP, or simply to meeting basic needs (UNDP 2020b). Conceived by the philosopher Amartya Sen, the capability approach to achieving well-being considers the expansion of freedom as a primary end and as the principal means of development. Sustainable development is anchored in the expansion of people's capabilities to drive global social, economic and environmental change according to sets of knowledge, skills, competencies, and psychological and physical abilities. It seeks to increase people's opportunities to flourish individually and collectively—to be healthy, educated, safe, included and politically engaged. It also demands the removal of major sources of unfreedom such as poverty, violence and oppression (Sen 1999).

A human well-being approach is people-centred, gender-sensitive, rights-based and locally relevant (Crabtree and Gasper 2020; Ghosh 2016). Investing in capabilities means "*empowering people to identify and pursue their own paths for a meaningful life. It challenges us to think of people as agents rather than as patients*" (UNDP 2020b:6). A focus on environmental well-being and capabilities is now also absolutely vital. As the *Human Development Report 2020* observed, "*the increasingly important questions for many countries are not about the overall size of the pie but the relative size of its slices. In this year's Report, [...] we also worry about the oven*" (UNDP 2020b).

Box 3. Human well-being and capabilities—Why are the SDGs clustered in this way?

"Human well-being and capabilities" is the first of six "entry points" for a systemic approach to realizing the SDGs (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). Accordingly, this report focuses on SDGs 1 (no poverty), 3 (good health and well-being), 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), 13 (climate action), 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and 17 (partnerships for the Goals). These SDGs are central to eradicating deprivations across multiple dimensions, expanding human capabilities, tackling inequalities and closing opportunity gaps, and creating the conditions for everyone to realize their potential across the life-course. This cluster of SDGs is also concerned with upholding human rights and safeguarding the natural environment on which the well-being of current and future generations depends (UN DESA 2020a).

Clustering the SDGs assists decision makers to address multiple goals simultaneously based on current knowledge of the linkages between social and environmental systems (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). The most efficient way to make progress on a given target is to take advantage of positive synergies with other targets while resolving the negative trade-offs (Ehrensperger et al. 2019). This means applying cross-sectoral systems thinking that goes beyond mitigating symptoms and towards substantive structural changes in all policy areas (Hujo and Carter 2019). Evidence from around the world shows that it is possible to advance human well-being without intensive resource use, without leaving many behind and without creating conflict (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019).

This report synthesizes research submitted by Geneva-based institutions and their global networks to the project *From Science to Practice: Research and Knowledge to Achieve the SDGs* (*Box 1*). Under the headings of *Freedom from Poverty*, *Freedom from Violent Conflict* and *Freedom to Flourish*, this report presents findings from these submissions as they relate to human well-being in the context of current policy-relevant knowledge on SDG progress. These headings and the submissions underline the individual and collective dimensions of well-being, as well as the linkages between different dimensions of social, health and environmental systems. Despite the severe setbacks caused by Covid-19, the scientific knowledge base provides many examples of immediate and longer-term responses which can expand and create sustainable freedoms, in the direction of progress towards the SDGs and of greater human well-being for all.

2. Freedom from Poverty – What Progress Has Been Made?

In recent decades, the world has made substantial advances towards eradicating extreme poverty, advancing human well-being and building capabilities; but extreme deprivations persist, and progress varies significantly between regions. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic abruptly disrupted implementation towards many of the SDGs and threatens to reverse years of progress on poverty, health care and education. Environmental degradation and climate change further undermine past gains and the well-being of future generations (UN DESA 2020a).

2.1 Extreme poverty and Covid-19

The number of people living below the monetary threshold of USD1.90[1] per person per day has been declining for years (driven to a large extent by China and India), marking progress towards SDG 1. But even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the pace of global poverty reduction was decelerating and was not on track to realize the global target of ending poverty by 2030 (UN 2020). After a decline from 15.7% in 2010 to 10.0% in 2015, the global extreme poverty rate was estimated at 8.2% in 2019 (UN DESA 2020a; Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). The pandemic is now reversing the trend of poverty reduction, causing the first increase in global poverty in more than 20 years. According to recent estimates, the global extreme poverty rate was projected to be 8.4-8.8% in 2020, which is close to the level in 2017, representing a push of many millions of people back into extreme poverty (Figure 1) (UN 2020; UN DESA 2020c).

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[1]   Although widely used, it is important to note its limitations as a single comparative measure (Box 2) and critiques (e.g. Reddy and Lakoti, 2016).

Figure 1. Extreme poverty UN DESA (2020c). From *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020* by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ©2020 United Nations. Used with permission.
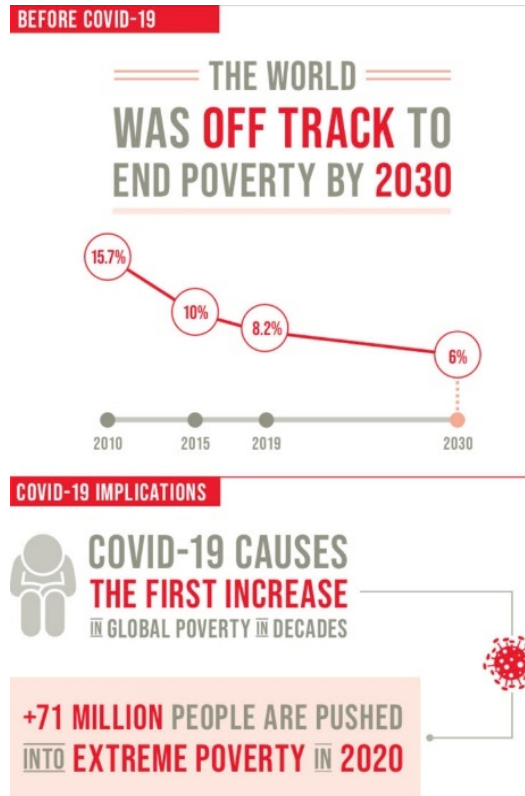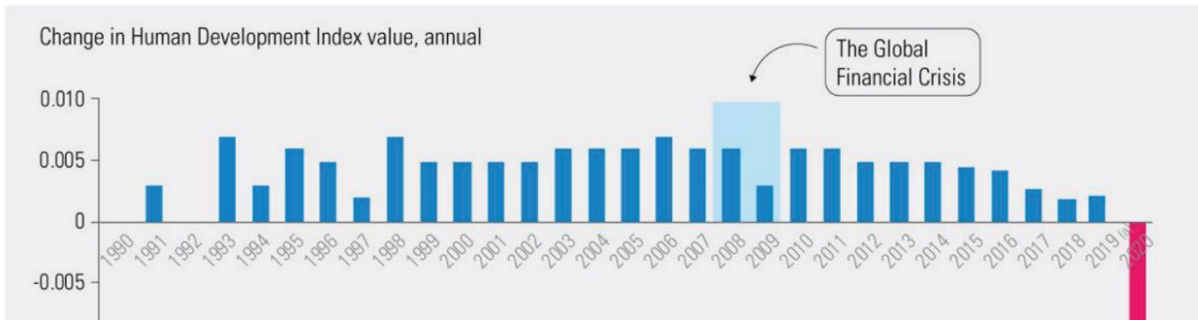

Figure 2. Global Human Development Index by year (UNDP 2020a)

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