

## **Power relations? What power relations? The de-politicising conceptualization of development of the UNDP**

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February 2017

**Acknowledgements:** *I would like to thank Ruth Judge and Tom Kugler for their careful and disinterested help, and the referees of the journal for their helpful comments. Also Karlos Pérez de Armiño (HEGOA Institute, UPV-EHU) and David Howarth (University of Essex) for their indispensable support.*

**Funding:** This work was supported by the Education Department of the Basque Government, under the Doctoral Research Staff Improvement Program's Grant [POS\_2015\_1\_0058].

**Biographical note:** Juan Telleria is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Ideology and Discourse Analysis Programme of the Department of Government of the University of Essex. His working experience in the field of international cooperation for development – Barcelona, Nicaragua, Chiapas and Guatemala – motivated him to propose a doctoral dissertation on the discursive dimension of development theories. While developing his doctoral dissertation in the University of the Basque

Country he visited several times Arturo Escobar at the University of North Carolina, who influenced his critical perspective. His research focuses on the implicit power dimension of the supposedly neutral and impartial development discourses – specifically the UNDP’s human development framework, the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals. He collaborates with the HEGOA Institute of the University of the Basque Country.

### **Abstract**

The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals agenda points far into 2030, which shows that its post-war development endeavor is not functioning effectively. This article implements a discourse analysis of the UN Development Programme’s (UNDP) Human Development Reports (HDR) and exposes their internal contradictions. This analysis enables a critical reflection on the UNDP’s political position: its reports conceal the political causes of underdevelopment. By concealing the antagonistic/conflictual dimension of social issues – poverty, inequality, and exclusion – the UNDP naturalizes the actual neoliberal order. The HDR turns political problems into technical issues; according to this approach, no power relations have to be changed in order to overcome underdevelopment.

**Keywords:** UNDP, human development, discourse analysis, antagonism, power.

### **INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HUMAN DEVELOPMENT? HOW CAN WE PROMOTE IT?**

The United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agenda did not achieve its aims before the 2015 deadline. In 2013, the UN began to design a post-2015 development agenda ‘slated to carry on the work of the MDGs’.<sup>1</sup> The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda, adopted in October 2015, extends the project to 2030. The existence of both the MDGs and the SDGs agendas shows that, 30 years after the UN Declaration on the Right to Development (1986), the implementation of this ‘inalienable human right’ (Article 1) is far from being realized. Furthermore, it indicates that, more than 70 years after the creation of the UN, the goal of promoting ‘social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom’ for every people (UN Charter, Preamble) is still an

elusive aim. In other words, the existence of the MDG/SDG agendas shows that for many complex and diverse reasons, the UN's development endeavour is not functioning effectively.

The article analyses the development discourse of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), one of the central institution of the UN's development system since 1966;<sup>2</sup> its discourse has been one of the most influential in the field of development in recent decades.<sup>3</sup> I examine the biased and contradictory development discourse within the UNDP's Human Development Reports (HDRs) from a post-structuralist perspective, taking Laclau and Mouffe's work as a starting point. I draw on these authors' understanding of the political as an inherently conflictual realm<sup>4</sup> – I will explain later this idea and the concept of 'antagonism'. I highlight a discursive contradiction in the HDRs: although their descriptions of the world show clear examples of antagonistic struggles and conflicts within the development realm, this antagonistic dimension is concealed when human development is explicitly described (What is human development?) and when proposals to promote development are offered (How to promote human development?). The UNDP overlooks the conflictual dimension of development – i.e., the political and volitional causes of underdevelopment. The HDRs flatten political problems into technical issues. From the UNDP's perspective, no power relations have to be changed in order to overcome underdevelopment; the promotion of technical skills will solve the problem. The aim of this article is to contribute to the debate about the failure of the UN's development endeavour by showing the contradictions within the human development framework: the UNDP offers a biased perspective of development that denies its political dimension – the political causes of underdevelopment.

This article is organized into five sections. First, I explain the theoretical and methodological foundations of the research. In the next section (Part A) I discuss how the UNDP understands development *at the individual level* (i.e., individual capabilities and freedoms), and then explore what happens when this conceptualization of development is applied in real contexts (as described by the UNDP). Part B applies the same framework to *the country/national level*. In Part C I analyse the contradiction that emerges when the UNDP promotes development solutions without considering antagonism and conflict. To conclude, I historically contextualize this contradiction and reflect on its consequences.

## **DISCOURSE, ANTAGONISM AND CONTRADICTION**

## **Discourse and contingency**

In this article I follow Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of discourse. They define a discursive structure as a fixation of signs in a relational net, in which the meaning of each sign depends on its relations with other signs – the meaning of “father” depends on the meaning of mother, son, daughter, etc.<sup>5</sup>. Their theoretical proposal is based on the epistemological conviction that reality must be mediated in order to be grasped; for that reason, a discourse generates a symbolic order that enables subjects to relate to reality.<sup>6</sup> Discourse is thus an articulatory practice in which the social is organized within a particular relational structure.<sup>7</sup> Subjects understand and act upon the world within a structure of meaningful elements.<sup>8</sup>

Laclau and Mouffe understand this ‘relational net’ from a post-structuralist perspective: ‘every concrete fixation of the signs’ meaning is *contingent*; it is possible but not necessary’.<sup>9</sup> They avoid a positivistic understanding of discourse in which reality can be grasped *as it is*,<sup>10</sup> as well as a structuralist one in which meanings are rigidly interlinked in a necessary way. They instead consider that, although each discursive structure links concepts in a given way, it is always open to modifications through a variety of alternative articulatory practices.<sup>11</sup> Since a discursive order may be influenced by manifold factors,<sup>12</sup> ‘a discourse is always constituted in relation to what it excludes’; therefore it is ‘always in danger of being undermined’.<sup>13</sup> In other words, a discursive structure generates a meaningful semiotic order by linking some concepts (moments) and excluding others (elements). The existence of these excluded elements constantly threaten the stability of a given discursive construction, because alternative discursive articulations can be generated through their inclusion in the semiotic web.

Jørgensen and Phillips state that the deconstructive work of Laclau and Mouffe is based on a careful reading of discursive structures in a way that ‘uncovers their unargued assumptions and internal contradictions’ and enables further thinking.<sup>14</sup> In this article I analyse the UNDP’s human development framework as it is conveyed in the HDRs and expose an internal contradiction that shows this discourse’s *contingency*. Discussing this contradiction enables a critical analysis of the political assumptions underlying the UNDP’s discourse, which draws on Mouffe’s understanding of antagonism and the political. I first briefly explain Mouffe’s work before outlining the contradiction within the UNDP’s discourse.

## **Antagonism and the political**

Following Carl Schmitt's work, Mouffe argues that the social sphere is inherently characterized by negativity and conflict, which 'can never be overcome'.<sup>15</sup> 'The political' is the antagonistic field in which enemies struggle in order to shape the social according to their interests. Society is the product of a series of practices that attempt to create a certain order in a contingent, changing context. Therefore, antagonism is the confrontation between different groups seeking hegemony. In this way, Mouffe criticises the ontological assumptions of liberal theory. She states that liberalism avoids acknowledging that negativity cannot be overcome, and asserts that liberal proposals are based on the 'belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason'.<sup>16</sup>

The denial of 'the political' in its antagonistic dimension is, I have argued, what prevents liberal theory from envisaging politics in an adequate way. The political in its antagonistic dimension cannot be made to disappear by simply denying it or wishing it away.<sup>17</sup>

This denial has important consequences in political practice. Instead of assuming that conflict cannot be fully overcome and then generating political institutions to adequately channel it,<sup>18</sup> liberalism reduces conflict 'to a simple competition between interests which can be harmonised through dialogue. (...) Thereby making adversary forces invisible and reducing politics to an exchange of arguments and the negotiation of compromises'.<sup>19</sup> Liberal theory assumes that the antagonistic political realm can become a supposedly neutral realm in which technical solutions can be applied. Mouffe asserts that every society is the outcome of a particular configuration of power relations, which has been constructed to the exclusion of other possibilities.<sup>20</sup> According to Mouffe, political action thus implies choosing between conflicting alternatives derived from antagonistic political commitments.<sup>21</sup> For that reason, politics cannot be replaced by technical knowledge: acting in the political realm is not a matter of neutral knowledge and optimal solutions; it is about power and the dynamics of domination<sup>22</sup>.

### **The contradiction within the UNDP's discourse**

The objective of this article is to show that *the UNDP excludes the concept of 'antagonism' from its articulation of the human development discourse*. The UNDP's discourse links 'human development' with well-being, freedom, the individual, choices, opportunities, capabilities, health, education, democracy, economic growth, etc. but not with 'antagonism' – domination, struggle, conflict, etc. When the UNDP reflects on human development and how to promote it, these concepts are not articulated within its framework.

This failure to address concepts related to antagonism represents an inconsistency in the UNDP's discourse, which can be outlined by explaining these two contradictory positions within the HDR. On the one hand, when the reports analyse and describe the world, *they contain exemplary cases of antagonistic struggles in the development realm*, between both individuals and countries: individuals compete between themselves for greater freedom and countries design development strategies that impede other countries' development. On the other hand, when the reports discuss the human development theoretical framework (What is human development?), or when they propose policies intended to foster human development (How to promote human development?), *they ignore these antagonistic struggles*.

This article assesses *the confrontation of these two contradictory positions within the HDRs*<sup>23</sup> in order to examine the political assumptions within the UNDP's discourse.

## **PART A. WHAT IS HUMAN DEVELOPMENT? THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL**

### **The human development framework: capabilities, opportunities and achievements**

To begin, I briefly explain the UNDP's human development framework and its conceptualization of development as expanding the capabilities and opportunities of the individual. I argue that, although the UNDP claims to have re-centred the debate on development from a primarily economic view to one that considers the individual as the locus of development (i.e., people, and not economic growth, should be the aim of development),<sup>24</sup> its reports offer an instrumental conceptualization of human beings<sup>25</sup> that positions the human individual as a *means* rather than an *end* unto itself.<sup>26</sup>

The human development framework draws on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, which can be understood as a reaction to the philosophical assumptions of earlier development theories.<sup>27</sup> He criticizes utilitarian approaches to development as being focused exclusively on the ends, while disregarding the means by which a desired outcome is achieved.<sup>28</sup> He also criticises the Rawlsian understanding of justice and fairness<sup>29</sup> – which influenced the basic needs approach promoted by the International Labour Organization in the 80s<sup>30</sup> – because it only considers the means and neglects the differences between individuals when turning means into ends.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Sen proposes focusing not on the means or the ends, but on the interplay between them – on an individual's opportunities to achieve their desired aims, i.e., *freedom*. In other words, means facilitate one's liberty to act, but they do not assure it. Ends can be achieved in an immoral way – for example by restricting some

people's liberty for the benefit of others. In order to create an institutional framework that enables people to freely achieve their aims, attention should be focused on *the real options that individuals have to turn opportunities into achievements*. Thus, the Capability Approach promotes enhancing people's capabilities in order to expand their opportunities. From this perspective, *development is synonymous with broadening an individual's freedom*: the freer an individual is to choose and act in a given society, the more developed the society is. Sen describes development as 'a process of expanding the real freedom that people enjoy'.<sup>32</sup>

In 1990 the UNDP used Amartya Sen's Capability Approach<sup>33</sup> to build the human development framework: 'Freedom, therefore, is the most vital component of human development strategies. People must be free to actively participate in economic and political life.'<sup>34</sup> This approach is reflected in the UNDP's definition of human development:

Human development is a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical ones are to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living. (...) It also helps to distinguish clearly between two sides of human development. One is the formation of human capabilities, such as improved health or knowledge. The other is the use that people make of their acquired capabilities, for work or leisure.<sup>35</sup>

Hence human development has two consecutive, interrelated steps: 1) creating and strengthening people's potential to act, and 2) using such potential. The first step *turns capabilities into opportunities*. Being healthier and more educated, for example, enlarges an individual's range of choices. The second step *turns opportunities into achievements*. From the UNDP's perspective, leisure and work, for example, are achievements. Therefore, Sen and the UNDP share an abstract, theoretical linear pattern, which states that the broader an individual's capabilities are, the more opportunities they have to turn them into achievements. We can represent this pattern in a simple fashion:

*Capabilities → Opportunities → Achievements*

Considering this theoretical basis – assumed by both Sen and the UNDP – we should conclude that right actions (policies), based in right knowledge, expertise and ability, expand people's capabilities, and that there is no reason to think they will not result in greater opportunities and generally better

achievements. We find in the UNDP's reports, however, that when this theoretical strategy is put into practice it is altered, thereby reproducing this logic as well as changing it. Capabilities and opportunities are understood in a more concrete way, presumably influenced by the Human Development Index's (HDI) statistical structure: 'longevity and knowledge refer to the formation of human capabilities, and income is a proxy measure for the choices people have in putting their capabilities to use.'<sup>36</sup> Health and education are conceptually linked to capabilities, while income – as the result of salaried work – is related to opportunities and achievements. These three concepts represent development, the end of which 'must be human well-being'.<sup>37</sup> Therefore we can translate the abstract linear pattern into a much more concrete model:

*Health + Education → Work/Income → Well-being*

This new linear logic sounds extremely economic. First, capabilities have to be increased in order to make people more productive. Second, markets turn an individual's productivity into opportunities to work and consume ('income is a proxy measure for the choices people have in putting their capabilities to use')<sup>38</sup>. Third, it is assumed that this logic tends to increase people's well-being. This linear approach reveals that, although the UNDP intended to overcome a purely economic view of development – by proposing that people should be at the centre of development<sup>39</sup> – this did not happen in practice. This extremely economic perspective reveals how the UNDP has understood human development in its reports since 1990. For example:

Skill formation, in addition to general education, promotes more productive uses of human capabilities. Cultivators in the Republic of Korea, Malaysia and Thailand - using modern technology - produced 3% more output for every additional year of schooling they had received. And the higher level of education of farmers in the Indian Punjab explains in part why their productivity is higher than that of farmers in the Pakistani Punjab. Investment in human capital thus increases people's productivity and enhances the chances of their employment - by raising the potential for future economic growth. Of course, if education does not create the skills demanded by society, it can lead to educated unemployment and considerable waste of human potential.<sup>40</sup>



The HDRs do not assess education in terms of individual's self-emancipation – the ability to freely think and decide – but instead as a way to be more productive. From the UNDP's perspective, education should create the skills demanded by society through labour markets. Health is understood in the same way:

Human development requires, among other things, considerable investment in education, health and nutrition. The result is a healthier and better educated population that is capable of being economically more productive.<sup>41</sup>

Through purely economic thinking, health and education are considered necessary 'investments' in an individual's 'more productive' performance in the market. This perspective is echoed in recent reports:

Poor child health can permanently damage a child's cognitive development and later affect labour productivity as an adult.<sup>42</sup>

By providing basic health care, adequate nutrition, and nurturing and stimulation in a caring environment, interventions in early childhood development help ensure children's progress in primary school, continuation through secondary school and successful entry into adulthood and engagement in the workforce.<sup>43</sup>

All UNDP reports contain an instrumental conceptualization of the individual: investing in people's health and education turns them into more efficient workers.<sup>44</sup> However, the supposed aim of human development should be the individual's well-being.<sup>45</sup> How does the UNDP link this instrumental conceptualization of the individual with the aim of promoting well-being?

### **Opportunities and achievements in a competitive environment**

The 2015 HDR will help answer this question. It states:

Today more than half the world's population is under age 30. These young people are likely to be healthier and better educated than their parents and can take advantage of modern communications technologies and media that enable them to engage more fully in global society. So they have higher work expectations — but many of them cannot find work.<sup>46</sup>

Again, health and education improve an individual's performance in the labour market. However, despite their higher work expectations, *healthy and educated people are not able to turn capabilities into real achievements*. The reason why is related to the linear logic outlined above. The UNDP's theoretical framework states that the greater an individual's capabilities, the broader its opportunities, and thus the greater its probability to attain satisfactory achievements. Yet when this theoretical framework is applied in real contexts, as described by the UNDP, it does not work. The UNDP's linear logic is disrupted when capabilities have to be turned into opportunities and real achievements *in a competitive environment* – labour markets.<sup>47</sup> In such an environment some succeed and others do not.

The contradiction between the UNDP's theoretical framework and its own analysis of actual economic tendencies is evident in the 2015 report, which focuses on work and labour markets. The report starts by highlighting the importance of work in people's lives and in human development:

Work enables people to earn a livelihood and be economically secure. It is critical for equitable economic growth, poverty reduction and gender equality. It also allows people to fully participate in society while affording them a sense of dignity and worth.<sup>48</sup>

Work can enhance human development when policies expand productive, remunerative and satisfying work opportunities, enhance workers' skills and potential and ensure their rights, safety and well-being.<sup>49</sup>

From this perspective, work is a key element of turning opportunities into achievements. However, the transition from capabilities to opportunities, and from opportunities to achievements, is regulated by the market, therefore, it is problematized. The UNDP acknowledges that 'the labour market is now global': digital technologies 'heighten the competition by removing geographical barriers', so 'workers must compete on a global scale'.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, 'the technological revolution has been accompanied by rising inequality'.<sup>51</sup> Therefore:

The global value chain system generates winners and losers, within and across countries and industries. (...) This in turn puts pressures on workers' wages and working conditions (...).<sup>52</sup>

That there is a global labour surplus makes competition among workers even fiercer.<sup>53</sup>

The report recognises that this is not a temporary situation, but the effect of an economic system based on global competition:

A flexible approach to production and cost cutting, including labour costs, has been the producer response. Low labour costs and flexible commitments to workers allow companies to quickly and efficiently respond to shifts in consumer needs and in the location of demand.<sup>54</sup>

Workers have to continually adapt to a 'more competitive environment',<sup>55</sup> and constantly dedicate 'more time to searching for new opportunities.'<sup>56</sup> Consequently, 'globalizing work generated gains for some and losses for others'.<sup>57</sup> This highlights the contradiction outlined above. On the one hand, the UNDP's analysis of actual economic tendencies shows that individuals have to compete with each other in order to increase their well-being in a system in which some win and some lose. On the other hand, the UNDP's theoretical framework (capabilities-opportunities-achievements) fails to consider this antagonistic dimension, and assumes that increasing individual's capabilities and opportunities – in other words, promoting development – directly results in higher achievements (well-being). The UNDP's analysis of the world acknowledges the existence of antagonistic struggles, but does not articulate them into its definition of human development.

## **PART B. WHAT IS HUMAN DEVELOPMENT? THE COUNTRY/NATIONAL LEVEL**

### **Assessing and promoting development at the national level**

The UNDP's human development framework focuses on the individual: theoretically, development happens on the individual level, enlarging the individual's capabilities and turning them into opportunities to obtain real achievements. Yet the UNDP's advisory mandate is instead focused on the national level: the HDRs do not evaluate individual development, but the development of the nation as a whole.

The orientation of this Report is practical and pragmatic. It aims to analyse country experience to distill practical insights. (...) Its purpose is to make relevant experience available to all policymakers.<sup>58</sup>

The reports assess countries from three intertwined perspectives: *individualism*, *comparison*, and *cooperation*.

## ***Individualism***

The UNDP analyses each country's situation separately by considering the *internal* characteristics that influence its development. Each country is conceived of as an autonomous agent, and internal and external factors are considered separately.<sup>59</sup> While a favourable external environment may help, successful development depends on how each country manages its internal conditions:

Although the battle for human development must be fought in the developing countries, a favourable external environment can help considerably.<sup>60</sup>

The real causes of poverty and human deprivation lie deep in the national policy actions of the developing countries. Improvements in external environment can help greatly, but they can never substitute for domestic reforms.<sup>61</sup>

The 2015 report, for example, asserts that national employment strategies are responsible for promoting sustainable work and human development:

More comprehensive national employment strategies are required, with a basic focus on creating more and better quality work for women and men. Such an approach, which places the needs of people at the core of economic policy, could be the centrepiece of a country's national development strategy.<sup>62</sup>

The structure of the HDI also reinforces this individualistic perspective: each country's internal characteristics – health, education and income – are separately measured and an index is calculated for each country.

## ***Comparison***

When analysing the state of human development around the world, the UNDP assesses each country's performance and compare their achievements. It is assumed that every country is managing its internal conditions, and that some do it better than others. Comparisons between countries occur on almost every page of every HDR. For example:

Sri Lanka, Chile, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Tanzania and Thailand, among others, do far better in human development than in income, showing that they have directed more of their economic resources towards human progress. Oman, Gabon, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal, Cameroon and the United Arab Emirates, among others, do considerably worse, showing that they have not yet translated their income into human progress.<sup>63</sup>

The individualistic and comparative perspectives are complementary: the performance of each autonomous agent is contrasted. Again, the HDI is a good example of this comparative perspective.

### **Cooperation**

Finally, given that each autonomous agent is responsible for dealing with its internal conditions, and that some are doing better than others, the reports promote the creation of *a more cooperative external environment* for development. From the UNDP's perspective, favourable external conditions can foster cooperation, but not cooperation between equals; instead, one in which 'the best' help 'the worst'. For example:

The hope is that the developing world can be taken to a basic level of human development in a fairly short period – if national development efforts and international assistance are properly directed.<sup>64</sup>

Human development planning can be done only at the national level, but many governments in the developing world are still not fully equipped to undertake such exercises entirely on their own. International agencies can provide the necessary technical expertise and assistance at the request of developing country governments for formulating their human development plans.<sup>65</sup>

This cooperative logic is echoed in all HDRs to date. In the 2015 report, for example:

A Global Deal can guide governments in implementing policies to meet the needs of their citizens. Without global agreements, national policies may respond to labour demands at home without accounting for externalities. (...) This kind of agreement offers guiding principles to signatories but leaves space for national governments to implement policies within national contexts to meet commitments. Motivated by global actions, national policies create real change in local communities.<sup>66</sup>

In summary, the reports portray the development of nations in the following way: each country is an autonomous agent that is responsible for dealing with its internal conditions in order to foster development, some countries do it better than others, and cooperation among them can generate a better external environment for promoting human development. If every country does so successfully, and if all of them collaborate in order to generate a cooperative external context, there should be no resistance to steady development and improvement of its population's well-being. Let us analyse how

this way to portray nations/countries is used by the UNDP to avoid the antagonistic dimension of international relations.

### **Confronting development strategies**

When articulating its development discourse the HDRs do not refer to inherent conflictual-antagonistic factors that could impede cooperation between the parts in order to achieve mutually beneficial solutions. However, its reports show many examples of antagonistic struggles within the development realm: cases in which some countries' development strategies *require* the underdevelopment of others. For example, the first three HDRs (1990, 1991, 1992) described the emerging debt crisis.

During the 1980s, many severely indebted developing countries were unable to pay back their loans, so major cuts and austerity plans were implemented. This debt crisis and its effects on human development were some of the main issues covered by these reports:

Many countries recorded major reverses in the 1980s – with rising rates of child malnutrition and infant mortality, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Budget cuts greatly squeezed social spending. Some countries avoided reductions in social programmes through better economic management, but most countries in Africa and Latin America paid a heavy social price during the adjustment period of the 1980s.<sup>67</sup>

Decreased government spending on social services – reductions of two thirds in many countries<sup>68</sup> – had a negative influence on human development:

Debt repayments, as shown, have been one of the fiercest competitors for spending on human development, especially for spending on the basic need of the less privileged, less vocal, less organized and less powerful groups.<sup>69</sup>

Further economic problems emerged as a result of the financial crisis:

Professor Irving Fisher, as far back as 1933, made some profound observations that the experience of the 1980s reconfirmed: the liquidation of debts cannot keep up with the fall in prices which it causes. In that case, the liquidation defeats itself. While it diminishes the number of dollars owed, it may not do so as fast as it increases the value of each dollar owed. Then we have the great paradox which is the chief secret of most, if not all, great depressions: *the more debtors pay, the more they owe.*<sup>70</sup>

At this critical point, cooperation could have helped these countries return to the 'path of rapid economic development'.<sup>71</sup> *But cooperation did not come.* As the 1992 HDR states, during the 1980s real interest rates for foreign debt were four times higher for poor nations (17%) than for rich ones (4%); 83% of multinational companies' investments were directed towards rich countries; and trade barriers were raised and subsidies increased for producers in the north for products for which poor countries enjoy a competitive advantage.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, as the UNDP affirms:

The real irony is that – when the level of average protection in developing countries is beginning to come down, partly as a result of structural adjustment programmes – the protectionist trends in the industrial nations are gaining ground.<sup>73</sup>

Countries with low levels of debt did not help severely indebted countries *because it would have constrained their own development.* These measures would have decelerated wealthier countries' economic growth and, more importantly, damaged their competitive positions in global markets. Not taking these measures widened the competitive gap between powerful countries and developing ones. Countries with low levels of debt did not alter their development strategy *even though it meant widening the gap between developed and underdeveloped countries.*

This example provides further evidence of the contradiction discussed above. On the one hand, the UNDP's theoretical approach to the international realm ignores any inherent, necessary antagonistic conflict between nations that could impede cooperation between them in the pursuit of higher levels of general development. On the other hand, when the UNDP analyses countries' general development tendencies, it provides clear examples of antagonistic conflict. Again, the UNDP's analysis of the actual world detects antagonistic struggles, but its theoretical understanding of human development overlooks them.

### **PART C. HOW TO PROMOTE DEVELOPMENT?**

The UNDP's development proposals also fail to consider the antagonistic and conflictual struggles revealed in its reports. The reports acknowledge the negative effects on development of an economic system based on competition, in which some win and some lose.

Developing countries suffer major losses because they are denied market opportunities.<sup>74</sup>

Developing countries also face the risk of becoming locked into low value-added nodes of global value chains that limit work opportunities, skill development and technology exposure.<sup>75</sup>

The 1992 HDR described the consequences of these antagonistic struggles:

The Report presents a disturbing new analysis of the global distribution of income and opportunities – demonstrating that income disparities have in recent years widened dramatically. In 1960, the richest 20% of the world population had incomes 30 times greater than the poorest 20%. By 1990, the richest 20% were getting 60 times more. And this comparison is based on the distribution between rich and poor countries. Adding the maldistribution within countries, the richest 20% of the world's people get at least 150 times more than the poorest 20%.<sup>76</sup>

By 2015, the situation had become still graver:

A small elite takes a large share of global wealth. The richest 1 percent held 48 percent of global wealth in 2014, a share projected to be more than 50 percent in 2016. Around 80 percent of the world's people have just 6 percent of global wealth (...). Indeed, just 80 individuals together have as much wealth as the world's poorest 3.5 billion people. Such inequality has become a serious problem— both for economic efficiency and for social stability.<sup>77</sup>

The HDRs show that the markets are benefiting 'a small elite' at the expense of others and that this tendency has been consolidated in recent decades. *However* the UNDP still assumes that the same competitive system is the best way to overcome the problem. Technical arrangements and regulations can solve the problem:

Human freedom is vital for human development. People must be free to exercise their choices in properly functioning markets.<sup>78</sup>

Competitive markets are the best guarantee for efficient production. But these markets must be open to all the people, they require a skilfully crafted regulatory framework, and they must be supplemented by judicious social policy action.<sup>79</sup>



The list of global challenges is long, and at times responses may seem out of reach, but we know that markets can be better regulated, financial and trade systems adjusted, and environmental threats reduced. Certain adjustments can be made across global issue areas to increase the likelihood that states will act collectively and to ensure cohesiveness in global governance.<sup>80</sup>

Although this competitive system of economic distribution is increasingly generating inequality, the UNDP dogmatically contends that technical arrangements (policies, regulations, etc.) will solve the problem. That is, it maintains that cooperation and collectively agreed solutions will change the unequal trends.

Although the HDRs contain examples of antagonistic struggles and conflict in the pursuit of development, the UNDP avoids considering them as an inherent characteristic of international relations, and instead demonstrates an unbreakable confidence in the power of technical solutions based on cooperation. Antagonism is neglected – not articulated– in the discourse on proposals to promote human development.

### **CONCLUSION: POWER RELATIONS? WHAT POWER RELATIONS?**

Although the HDRs address antagonistic struggles in the development realm, the UNDP excludes this dimension when formulating its human development framework (What is human development? How to promote human development?) In conclusion, I contextualise this discursive construction in order to explain its contingency and to reflect on the exclusion of antagonism from its semiotic order.

The human development framework was created at the precise moment that the Soviet bloc collapsed: in 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, in 1991 the USSR was dissolved, and somewhere in between the UNDP designed a new way to understand development and launched its first HDR in 1990.<sup>81</sup> The new proposal was a paradigmatic example of the theoretical core values and principles of the prevailing side of the Cold War: liberalism. The UNDP accepted Francis Fukuyama's insights about the 'end of history'<sup>82</sup> and reproduced them in a politically correct fashion.<sup>83</sup> The first lines of the foreword of the first HDR are illuminating:

We live in stirring times. An irresistible wave of human freedom is sweeping across many lands. Not only political systems but economic structures are beginning to change in countries

where democratic forces had been long suppressed. People are beginning to take charge of their own destiny in these countries. Unnecessary state interventions are on the wane. These are all reminders of the triumph of the human spirit.<sup>84</sup>

The HDRs show that the international political and economic system is the outcome of a natural, necessary process. The UNDP bases its discourse on the 'idea that there is a natural order which is the consequence of the development of objective forces, be it the forces of production, the laws of history or the development of the spirit'.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, overcoming underdevelopment is not a matter of changing the actual political and economic order (i.e., the uneven power relations) because it is the necessary 'triumph of human spirit'. It is a matter of improving its functioning (i.e., technical arrangements and win-win solutions based on cooperation). For that reason, the UNDP does not offer real alternatives: the proposed solutions strengthen the concrete political and economic system in which underdevelopment emerged and do not plan substantial, in depth changes. As Mouffe states:

Globalisation is the usual justification given for the 'there is no alternative' dogma. (...) This kind of argument takes for granted the ideological terrain which has been established as a result of years of neo-liberal hegemony and transforms what is a conjunctural state of affairs into an historical necessity. Here, as in many other cases, the mantra of globalisation is invoked to justify the status-quo and reinforce the power of big transnational corporations.<sup>86</sup>

The UNDP's discourse avoids reflecting on the political causes of the problem it supposedly aims to overcome. Therefore the antagonistic dimension of the development realm is excluded from the discursive formation. The political-volitional dimension of the problem is concealed: underdevelopment is portrayed not as the result of domination dynamics and political decisions, but as a technical issue.<sup>87</sup> Since 1966 the UNDP has interpreted development as a matter of *technical assistance*, not as a matter of political commitment and transformation of dominant power relations.<sup>88</sup> The HDRs do not analyse the causes of underdevelopment; they simply assume it will be overcome with expertise in promoting development. The assumption is that no power relations have to be changed in the international realm: development is a matter of 'know how', of promoting the right policies and fostering adequate skills. Powerful countries know how to deal with the problem; that is why they help developing ones. In this way, the political realm is re-defined as neutral terrain in which win-win policies can be implemented that favour everybody.<sup>89</sup> The development apparatus operates like a vacuum that removes all political aspects of development and pretends that its decisions are motivated by technical considerations rather than political ones.<sup>90</sup> As Ferguson stated more than two decades ago:

The hegemonic problematic of “development” is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politized in the world today.<sup>91</sup>

The UNDP’s development discourse de-politicises the development realm and envisions a future based on the ‘rosy U.N. imaginary of a harmonious concert of equal and autonomous national subjects’.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> DESA, *The Millennium...*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Browne, *The UN Development...*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> McNeill, *Human Development...*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Howarth, 'Power, Discourse...' , 311-2.

<sup>6</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony...*, 2.

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- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 96.
- <sup>8</sup> Howarth, *Poststructuralism and After*, 10.
- <sup>9</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse*, 25.
- <sup>10</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, 106.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 105.
- <sup>12</sup> Howarth, *Poststructuralism and After*, 154.
- <sup>13</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse*, 27.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>15</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 130.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3-4.
- <sup>18</sup> Mouffe's proposes assuming the antagonism inherent in social relations and turning it into 'agonism'.  
"There is a distinction which I take to be crucial for grasping the specificity of modern democratic politics: the distinction between antagonism and agonism. A relation of antagonism is one that takes place between enemies, while a relation of agonism takes place between adversaries. (...) I envisage democratic politics as a form of 'agonistic pluralism'. This is a way to envisage democracy which, starting with the recognition of power relations and the conflicts that they entail, stresses that in modern democratic politics the crucial problem is how to transform antagonism into agonism. In other words, the aim of democratic institutions from this perspective is not to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere; it is to provide democratic channels of expression for the forms of conflicts considered as legitimate." (Mouffe, *The Radical Centre*, 16-17)
- <sup>19</sup> Mouffe, *The Radical Centre*, 13.
- <sup>20</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 131.
- <sup>21</sup> Mouffe, *On the political*, 10.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>23</sup> Buzzwords come and go in development theory and practice (Cornwall, 2005). Also, discursive structures adapt to changes in the context (Ziai, 2016). In order to demonstrate that the contradiction we will show in the UNDP's discourse has remained unaltered since 1990, our research will pay special attention to the first reports (early 1990s) and to the last ones (2010s).
- <sup>24</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1990*.
- <sup>25</sup> Telleria, 'Los dos discursos...'.  
<sup>26</sup> For a further analysis of the UNDP's discursive drift into a purely economic perspective of people and development, see Cammack 2016.
- <sup>27</sup> Amartya Sen's book *Inequality Reexamined* is especially interesting when trying to analyse this author's influence over the Human Development framework. The text draws on Sen's lectures from 1986, 1988 and 1989 (Sen, 1992: xii), and was published for the first time in 1992. This means that it shows Sen's thought in the period he worked with Mahbub ul Haq in the theoretical design of the human development paradigm (Haq, 2014).
- <sup>28</sup> Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 31-38.
- <sup>29</sup> Rawls, *A theory of Justice*.
- <sup>30</sup> Griffin and Knight, 'Human development,' 10; Sen, 'Development as Capabilities Expansion,' 46-49; Streeten, *First things....*
- <sup>31</sup> Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 26-30.
- <sup>32</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 3.
- <sup>33</sup> Our analysis will focus on the UNDP's proposals. For a similar analysis focused on Sen's work see Ziai, 2016: Chapter 12.
- <sup>34</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1990*, 84.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 10-11.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., Chapter 1.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 28.
- <sup>41</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1996*, 66.
- <sup>42</sup> UNDP, *HDR 2013*, 25.
- <sup>43</sup> UNDP, *HDR 2014*, 57.

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<sup>44</sup> For a detailed analysis of this instrumental conceptualization of the human being in the HDR, see Telleria 2014, 2015 and 2016.

<sup>45</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1990*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> UNDP, *HDR 2015*, 63.

<sup>47</sup> In his article entitled 'Markets and Freedoms: Achievements and Limitations of the Market Mechanism in Promoting Individual Freedoms' Sen raises his doubts about the adequateness of competition in the distribution of opportunities and freedom:

Just as a Pareto efficient outcome may well be thoroughly unequal and nasty, the corresponding weakly efficient combination of opportunity-freedoms can also be deeply unattractive. (Sen, 1993: 536)

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1990*, iii.

<sup>59</sup> Ziai defines this perspective as a 'methodological nationalism' which 'sees each country as a kind of container unrelated to others' (Ziai, *Development Discourse...*, 221).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>61</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1992*, 1.

<sup>62</sup> UNDP, *HDR 2015*, 152.

<sup>63</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1990*, 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>66</sup> UNDP, *HDR 2015*, 23.

<sup>67</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1990*, 18.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>69</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1991*, 80.

<sup>70</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1992*, 51-52.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>75</sup> UNDP, *HDR 2015*, 9.

<sup>76</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1992*, 1.

<sup>77</sup> UNDP, *HDR 2015*, 65.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>79</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1992*, 1.

<sup>80</sup> UNDP, *HDR 2014*, 9.

<sup>81</sup> Nederveen states that the main tension in contemporary development thinking and practice is the rift between the Washington institutions and the human development approach (Nederveen, 2010: xiii). In this sense, this rift reproduces the bipolar tension of the Cold War but in an exclusive liberal fashion: extremely liberal vs moderately liberal.

<sup>82</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History*.

<sup>83</sup> Although Fukuyama's book was published in 1992, it was based on an essay from 1989.

<sup>84</sup> UNDP, *HDR 1990*, iii.

<sup>85</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 132.

<sup>86</sup> Mouffe, *The Radical Centre*, 18.

<sup>87</sup> Ziai, *Development Discourse*, 179.

<sup>88</sup> Browne, *The UN Development...*

<sup>89</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, xiv-xvi.

<sup>90</sup> Della Faille, 'Discourse analysis...', 229.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 256.

<sup>92</sup> Hardt and Negri. *Empire*, 133.