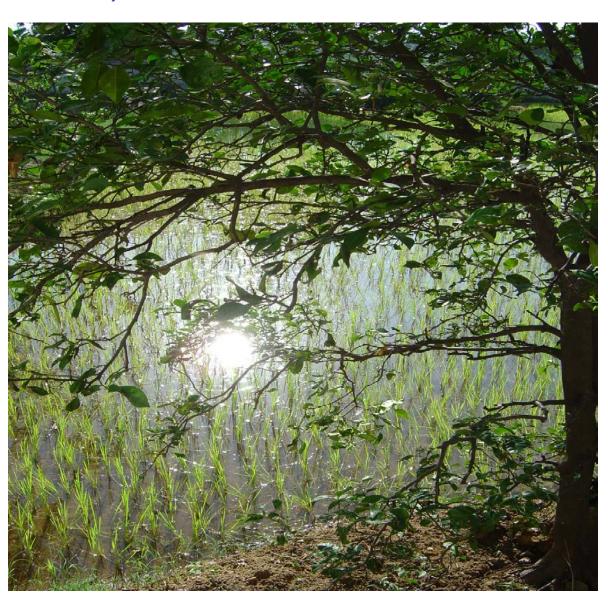# Rethinking Human Development in an Era of Planetary Transformation

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Cover photo by Kishan Khoday: Rice cultivation in Laxmipuram village, India.

ABSTRACT

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to set a new balance between people and planet, in stark contrast to the heavy social orientation and human centric nature of past development policy. This background paper reflects on what this means for the SDG implementation agenda before us, with a view to making the human development paradigm fit-for-purpose in an era of ecological change.

Climate change and ecological fragility call into question the assumption that human progress will make the future look better than the past. Development is being destabilized, and so too basic principles of human development theory - capability, agency and freedom. What happens to the concept of human agency when humanity has revealed itself as an agent of planetary change? How can the concept of 'development as freedom' evolve into 'sustainable development as freedom' as ecological change causes mass disruption and as sensibilities about freedom and rights transform? How can development pathways shift from linear to systems approaches to understand the complexities of ecological change?

Ecological change is destabilizing the status quo of development theory, exposing deep contradictions in policy and in practice. The SDGs reflect an aspiration to bring together the social and natural foundations of development policy. Achieving this goal will require more than scaled-up investments and new technology. Transformational change will also require adaptation of the concept of human development itself.

1. Rethinking Human Development

a) People, planet and the new development agenda

The cumulative implications of climate change, land degradation, water insecurity and biodiversity loss threaten achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Unless addressed, these drivers of change will act as a decelerator, slowing the rate of progress on SDG achievement, and could well lead to a reversal of development gains by mid-century, eroding the fundamental freedoms and choices at the core of the human development paradigm.

In addressing ecological change, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs aim to set a new balance between people and planet. But achieving this transformational vision will need more than scaled-up green finance and technology. An important shift is needed in human development theory lest it fade as a depleted mold of humanism, moving beyond the heavy social orientation and epistemic constructs of nature on which modern development theory was built. Human development has in some ways become a fetishistic idea, inspiring adherence by practitioners despite a clear need to examine internal contradictions now laid increasingly bare by climate change and broader trends of ecological fragility.

The conventional view of human development, as elaborated by Sen and ul Haq has been that progress is about expanding human potential, enlarging freedom, and helping people develop the capabilities that empower them to make choices. The pace of ecological change today makes this equation incomplete. The 2030 Agenda is a call to bring development theory back down to Earth, a catalyst to think outside the box, and an opportunity to achieve consilience between natural science and social policy; spheres of practice that have long rested in silos. But to achieve the SDG vision of transformational change, one must first understand the internal contradictions and barriers that exist in the foundations of the human development paradigm.

The dominant epistemological frameworks that drive development theory today retain an implicit bias towards the exploitation of nature as a means of achieving human development and moving along a linear pathway from a mythic 'state of nature' to the modern 'developed' world. This explains why, despite intentions to the contrary, modern development theory is itself one of the root causes of planetary crisis. Beyond new global frameworks for expanding cooperation for climate-resilient development solutions, scaling-up green finance and clean technology, transformative change also needs a motivating moral narrative to set a forward-looking vision for human development.

b) Human development theory disrupted

Climate change and ecological fragility are no longer passing crises but instead are not generating a "profound mutation in our relations to the world",[1] destabilizing the status quo of development theory and exposing deep contradictions in policy and practice. The disruption of planetary functions is now recognized as imperiling the future of development results and posing an existential threat to humanity. As planetary boundaries are breached, many aspects of development are being destabilized, and so too basic principles of human development, like capability, agency and freedom. What happens to the concept of human agency when humanity has revealed itself as an agent of planetary change? How can the concept of 'development as freedom' evolve into 'sustainable development as freedom' as ecological change causes mass disruption and as sensibilities about freedom and rights transform? How can development pathways shift from linear to systems approaches to understand the complexities of ecological change?

In recent decades, a distinct paradigm of human development has emerged, taking inspiration among other places in Sen's concept of 'development as freedom', which has shaped the narrative of development policy and its operationalization. Building on the role of enhanced human capabilities and human agency, the human development approach seeks to achieve a broader path to freedom. [2] As elaborated by Sen, "[e]xpansion of freedom is viewed both as the primary end and as the principal means of development. Development consists of the removal of various types of un-freedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity for exercising their reasoned agency…If the point of departure of the approach lies in the identification of freedoms, the main object of development, the reach of the policy analysis lies in establishing the empirical linkages that make the viewpoint of freedom coherent and cogent as the guiding perspective of the process of development." [3]

The SDGs express the reality that climate change and broader trends of ecological fragility have now arisen as a main source of 'un-freedom' in the world today - eroding biodiversity, land and food security and impacting a range of socially oriented goals from poverty reduction and women's empowerment to inequality and peace. For human development theory to evolve, the concept of human capability needs to be connected with the capability of the planet's ecosystems to support development. The concept of agency will also need to evolve, no longer limited to human agency but also considering the agency of ecosystems.

Two principles have historically been at the base of the capability approach – that the chosen capability be universally valued and that the capability be so basic that without it many other capabilities would be foreclosed. Resilience to ecological disruption should now be seen as one such capability at the core of development, taking us from Sen's original 'development as freedom' to a 'sustainable development as freedom' framework. In addition to the 'five

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[1]   Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK (2017), 8.

[2]   Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, *The Human Development Paradigm: Operationalizing Sen's Ideas on Capabilities*, Feminist Economics 9 (2-3), 301-317, Routledge, New York (2003) at 304.

[3]   Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Anchor Books, New York (1999), preface.

freedoms' outlined in Sen's original human development framework, resilience to ecological change can now be seen a 'sixth freedom'.

The human development paradigm retains deep roots in a vision of the ascendance of humanity from a mythic 'state of nature' to the modern 'developed' world, from a vision of humanity "as a prisoner of climate" to humanity as one of the main architects and drivers of planetary transformation. [4] But as elaborated by Chakrabarty, many of the original assumptions underlying human development theory are now on shifting ground, with climate change and ecological disruption catalyzing a "collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history." [5] Some of the basic premises of human development theory have become undone, as ecological change "severely qualifies the humanist history of modernity." An awareness of our geological agency is arising, with a view to the limitations we are placing on the Earth's ability to sustain planetary functions.

An understanding that we are not only agents of social change but also agents of planetary change is exemplified in the concept of the Anthropocene, recently endorsed by scientists for the current era in which humanity itself has become an agent of planetary change.[6] As posited by Chakrabarty "[i]s the geological agency of humans the price we pay for the pursuit of freedom?" "The mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use….[T]he relation between Enlightenment themes of freedom and the collapsing of social and natural constructs of history is more complicated than a simple binary would allow". [7]

2. On Nature and Culture

a) Traversing the ontological divide

Making human development theory fit-for-purpose in the SDG era requires a deconstruction of the concept's history and a better understanding of how the divide between nature and culture shaped the evolution of modern development theory and the way it continues to be expressed today. As noted by Descola, for many around the world the elements of nature were traditionally seen as imbued "with souls, consciousness, language and culture, much like that of humankind. Nature was one and reigned everywhere, distributing equally among humans and nonhumans a multitude of technical skills, ways of life and modes of reasoning." [8] Many cultures around the world saw agency in both human and non-human entities, and indeed no clear separation between the human and its environment, with the evolution of human culture focused on the need to maintain and support this balance between people and planet.

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[4] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, Critical Inquiry 35 (Fall 2009), at 206
[5] Ibid at 205
[6] *See* Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and Francois Gemenne, *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch*, Routledge, New York (2015).
[7] Ibid
[8] Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, University of Chicago Press (2013), xiv

Modern development paradigms however owe their legacy to a distinct set of principles that arose out of the European Enlightenment, spread globally through colonization. [9] For Argyrou, an anthropology of modern development theory reveals that the concept of progress was seen since the Enlightenment as dependent on people's freedom from the constraints placed on us by the natural world. This was a vision of the environment being a domain of utility to be brought under our control, with humans seen as "a band of bold though diminutive giants, gradually descending from the mountains, to subjugate the earth, and change climates with their feeble arms."[10] In the modernist paradigm of human development, society and culture is seen as above and evolved beyond the primitive natural environment out of which we arose, with human freedom being based on 'freedom from nature'.

As described by Fitzpatrick, in humanity's ascent, "culture confronted nature in standard mythic terms, and won…eliminating the deific obstacle to human progress and unveiling the true nature of the universe; a kind of reversal of Eden" whereby humanity would itself control nature and in turn reshape the planet in its own image. [11] Those opposing this agenda were seen as primitive, traditional and underdeveloped. In the modern paradigm of human development, "[n]ature was devoid of a spirit, and was a standing reserve of resources for man to serve his development. Mastery of nature came to be regarded as an expression of cultural superiority and the key mark of civilization".[12]

The transformation of nature was a "primordial act, transforming chaos into order, imbuing the environment with human form - a divine-like act to craft a new world and a new reality".[13] The ability to control and conquer nature was seen as a pre-condition for progress, and identified with individuality, liberty and freedom. Humanity's subordination of nature became among the most important criterion for defining the nature of the modern development paradigm. Freedom from nature meant internal freedom and out of this process came a 'liberated, sovereign subject' who would dare to overcome the boundaries which nature confronted us with. This individual, the 'developed human', became the great character in the story of our long march to modernity. Conquest of nature took on a sacred and mythic character at the base of the globalized order and of development theory, the basic elements of which continue to this day. The developed human and her/his freedom from nature became the new axis mundi; a new cosmology maintained through paradigms of progress.

The subordination of nature to human society within development policy and practice remains intact and strong today. The SDG vision of a new balance between people and planet is important in this regard, potentially serving as a catalyst for a new form of human development theory which addresses history's legacy of ontological duality between nature and culture. Today,

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9   Vassos Argyou, *The Logic of Environmentalism: Anthropology, Ecology and Post-coloniality*, Berghahn Books, Oxford (2005), vii.

10   Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (1784-91), New York (1966), 196 in Ivonne del Valle *From Jose de Acosta to the Enlightenment: Barbarians, Climate Change and (Colonial) Technology as the End of History*, in The Eighteenth Century, Volume 54, Number 4, Winter 2013, 435-459, University of Pennsylvania Press.

11   Peter Fitzpatrick, *The Mythology of Modern Law*, Routledge, London (1992), 44-53.

12   Ibid, 2.

13   Eliade quoted in Argyrou above at 10-11.

"the two story edifice of dualism, built to last by the great architects of the classic age, is still solid" but its faults are now increasingly apparent owing to planetary disruption and the impacts on global society. [14]

b) Reconciling global and local, past and future

The nature-culture divide that arose from the Enlightenment period was operationalized through policies enacted around the world in the colonial era. As colonial forces came into contact with local communities, a negative teleology emerged, in which the idea of modern developed humanity was constructed in opposition to primitive others, who seemingly lacked the agency and capability to reshape their environment for the benefit of civilization and progress.[15] This negative teleology and the epistemological divide between nature and culture was a driving force for the civilizing mission that emerged during the colonial era, with an Enlightenment vision of modernity and progress replicated as a universal truth and desire in opposition to the pluralism of worldviews on the balance of people and planet that existed at the time.[16]

The civilizing mission held that "acquaintance with the physical laws of the world, and the accompanying power of unlocking the secrets of nature and adapting nature to man's own ends, are on the whole, lowest among savages, mean among barbarians, and highest among modern educated nations." [17] Spreading modernity became a core mission of this early pathway, with societies around the world called on to leapfrog across the centuries onto a linear and universalized set of goals.

For most peoples across the South, the colonial interaction was a dramatic catalyst of change to their long-standing, local paradigms and policies on the balance between nature and society. Ever since, nature has stood "in dialectic relation to the colonial destruction that has preceded it." [18] For societies impacted by this era the natural world became a victim, "its roots consumed blood, and its extracted tears from the soil raised them through its branches, dispersed them in its architecture." This era of 'enlightenment imperialism' was in many ways the beginning of today's development world order and broader systems of modernity, with the nature-culture divide taking on practical consequence for local societies the world over, and for the poor and vulnerable in particular. [19]

By the start of the decolonization process in the mid-20th century and rise of the United Nations, a new vision of international development evolved but nevertheless inherited some of these underlying assumptions. The idea that human progress was inherently contingent on a conquest of nature continued as a central theme of development theory. As noted by the United

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[14] Descola, xvii

[15] Fitzpatrick, ix-xiii

[16] Ibid, 10

[17] Argyrou above at 17.

[18] Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2011), 5-6. *Also see* Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire and the Idea of Human Development*, Cambridge Press (2009).

[19] Ivonne del Valle *From Jose de Acosta to the Enlightenment: Barbarians, Climate Change and (Colonial) Technology as the End of History*, in The Eighteenth Century, Volume 54, Number 4, Winter 2013, 435-459, University of Pennsylvania Press at 436

Nations, "progress occurs only when people believe that man can, by conscious effort, master nature." [20] For most countries "it was a time to pause, some for years some for decades, to compose and reflect on whether there was anything more to do than to take the plunge forward and end up in a matter of decades on the other side of time." [21]

Attempts in recent decades to address the balance of people and planet have often found themselves constrained by the legacies of this past of violence against communities and nature. But with the toll on the planet mounting, many countries began to rethink the defects inherent in modern development paradigms. Evolving out of the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment, the 1992 Earth Summit and the 2012 World Summit on Sustainable Development, the vision of the SDGs can potentially mark an inflection point as the world looks over its shoulder at the concept of human progress and reconsiders its "evolutionary uncertainties and one-way determination." [22]

At a time when the modernist paradigm of development has strongly taken root in global society, the 2030 Agenda demands a future in which the divide between humans and nature is bridged. Understanding the legacy of dualism between nature and culture on which much of today's human development theory was sourced is critical to achieving transformational change in the SDG era. For human development paradigms and policy to evolve in such directions, an ontological transformation is needed to reset the boundaries of nature and culture and create a new cosmology of development, "heralding a new 'physics', a new 'anthropology' and a new order of things."

3. Reconstructing Human Development

a) Reimagining agency

Bridging the divide between nature and culture is key to reshaping human development theory and its pillars, including the concept of agency. We need to move beyond the assumption that human agency is the only force shaping development, and to embrace the increasingly apparent fact that natural systems such as the climate and other components of the global ecosystem are imbued with a form of capacity, serving as 'impersonal agents' shaping our world. [23]

Embracing both social and ecological sources of agency in the world must be a core part of taking a systems approach to development, a neo-Copernican shift, moving us beyond the human-centric assumptions of agency. With planetary boundaries breached and Earth systems in a state of flux, our world will be defined by a "proliferation of entanglements between human

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[20] Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (Patrick Camiller trans, first published 1996, 2004 ed) [trans of: *Le développement: Histoire d'une croyance occidentale*], 27.

[21] Argyrou, 33

[22] Ibid

[23] *See* Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter - A Political Ecology of Things,* Duke University Press, Durham, US (2010); William Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled humanism and the politics of swarming,* Duke University Press, Durham, US (2017); and Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*, Polity Press, Cambridge Press, Cambridge, UK (2017).

and nonhuman materialities" [24] with climatic systems, biological species, water systems, and other key aspects of planetary 'behaviour' now seen by many as 'actants' in their own right, with "trajectories, propensities and tendencies of their own" that need to be taken into account when considering the fate of humanity and the shape of human development policies.[25] Ecosystems with their power of metamorphosis exhibit self-governing capacities with different components impinging upon each other and humanity in numerous ways.[26] In this view, the 'competencies' of ecosystems, or what they are, is defined through their performance and behavior, and by extension their intermingling and underpinning of human functions and capacities. [27]

A new concept of 'impersonal' or 'distributive' agency would go beyond the traditional focus on agency as being distinctive to humans as an underpinning of human exceptionalism.[28] This seeks to place social and ecological forces on a level playing field, as a means of bridging the age-old nature-culture divide within development theory. The concept of impersonal agency casts a light on increasingly important and apparent connections between humanity and the ecological spheres from which we have arisen, pushing us beyond the Enlightenment view of nature as a mechanistic automaton at our service. "[T]he Earth is animated by countless forms of agents" and is not inert and inanimate. [29] The new concept counters the narcissistic reflex embedded in human-centered approaches, and ways that a "thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our Earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption." [30]

A new development theory would acknowledge the 'agentic' forces within nature that make up the world we live in. Evolution towards an impersonal and distributive theory of agency takes us to a more ecologically resilient, systems-oriented approach that "stretches received concepts of agency, action and freedom" beyond conventional human development theory. A key element in this approach would be the idea of an 'agency of assemblages' - the ways in which human and non-human forces in the world interact across place and time to cumulatively affect development pathways. In this view "the locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group". This acknowledges the role of ecosystem services beyond being mere 'intermediaries' that transport causes and consequences, to 'mediators' playing their own part in the story of development and the world. [31]

This goes beyond the atomistic form of human agency that has come to define the paradigm of human development. No longer is the human moral subject the sole cause and effect to be considered. Rather development theory must introduce the cumulative effect of both classic human-generated intentionality and the ecosystem forces that shape development outcomes. "Humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each

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[24] Bennet, *Vibrant Matter - A Political Ecology of Things,* Duke University Press, Durham, US (2010) at 115.

[25] Ibid at viii

[26] William Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled humanism and the politics of swarming,* Duke University Press, Durham, US (2017), 4.

[27] Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*, Polity Press, Cambridge Press, Cambridge, UK (2017), 56.

[28] Ibid, 61

[29] Ibid, 63

[30] Bennet at ix

[31] Latour, 93.

other. There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity." [32]

Viewing agency as located within a system of complex interactions between human and nonhuman actants is not simply a mere acknowledgement of the environment as a contextual factor to consider in policy making. Rather it recognizes that these impersonal forces of nature have trajectories and tendencies in their own right, exist within certain degrees of resilience, and drive many development results in much the same way human actions do. It helps shape a new form of human development theory and practice beyond the reductive, linear and mechanistic vision of agency, towards a more complex fractal that reflects the reality of our world and the more nuanced, multi-dimensional risk profile influencing SDG achievement. When we approach ecosystems "we do not find in them the inertia that would allow us, by contrast, to take ourselves to be agents but, on the contrary, we find agencies that are *no longer without connection* to what we are and what we do." [33]

A shift to an impersonal and distributed form of agency in development theory triggers new ways to think about and practice development, and helps transform the nature-culture divide that has served as a barrier to change. With the planetary crisis now destabilizing the foundations of human civilization and threatening to reverse many SDG results by mid-century, the reality of our inter-connectedness to the climate, the biosphere and other components of the global ecosystem has become self-evident. [34]

b) Planetary crisis in the emerging South

As noted above, geography played a pivotal role in the emergence of modernity and the spread of modern paradigms of civilization and human development during the colonial and post-colonial eras, generating a matrix of power and influence that shaped and continues to shape the development order. Today, the economic re-emergence of some parts of the global South is a vital factor in how development theories and practices will evolve, as the rise of the South may destabilize the 'geopolitical determinism' that shaped the nature of development thinking and policy in decades past.

In this process, an opportunity exists to engage the commitment by the 2030 Development Agenda and the SDGs to bottom-up approaches and mobilizing the role of the South in crafting solutions. But while an expanding role in shaping development paradigms and approaches is engaged by leaders and communities across the South, there also still exists a "post-colonial wariness of globalizing impulses". [35] The tension between global and local, and past and future, were at the center of debates and negotiations over the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, with concerns over global history and injustice at the forefront. To many in the South, the planetary crisis is first and foremost the product of a social rift, with the great divergence that emerged from the colonial and post-colonial enterprise based on a conquest of nature by the North. Balancing the social and ecological debt of the North, with the emerging implications of

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[32]   Ibid

[33]   Latour, 62.

[34]   *See generally* Carl Folke, *Resilience*, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Environmental Science, UK (2016).

[35]   DeLoughrey and Handley at 28

ecological change for a developing South was at the crux of global debates in recent years over global frameworks such as the SDGs and the new Paris Agreement on climate change.

This tension between the past and the future of nations, their development trajectories and relative ecological footprints, also has implications for the aforementioned concept of the Anthropocene. Many challenge the stated universality of this new concept, noting how industrialization and intensive resource use arose during the colonial era, tempering the universalizing characterization of the Anthropocene with social constructs of history and legacies of injustice. Some propose that the year 1610 be used as the marker for the start of the Anthropocene era, at which time the colonial enterprise was in full swing; co-terminal with the shift of biological resources from South to North as well as the start of global temperature rise. [36] An important critique is the overly-universalizing nature of the Anthropocene concept, many pointing to the imperial enterprise and the domination of the ecology of the South as a critical foundation for understanding the roots of modern ecological crises. [37]

For most of the South, playing a constructive role in the new global order expressed by the SDGs is based on a recognition of the planetary crisis, but also of the clear historic basis for its emergence. In engaging the process of adapting development policy to balance people and planet, the South revalorizes its place in the world, as an act of agency and re-emergence from the imperial and post-colonial legacies. Beyond a reactive approach, many in the South take a route through decolonial thinking, with critiques of modernity, and an understanding of the geopolitics of development knowledge production.

To achieve its vision of bottom-up action, the 2030 Agenda should proceed in a way that sees "the global and local come together, not by way of synecdoche…but in a way that each interrupts and distorts the other" building on the pluralism of histories, contexts, approaches and potential solutions that exist in the world. [38] In doing so, they can understand "the local and often inassimilable aspects of culture and history, which helps to uphold a sense of alterity while still engaging a global imaginary." [39] Addressing climate change and ecological fragility as a new source of 'unfreedom' in human development theory requires a grounding in the potentiality of bottom-up transformational change in the world and the urgency for new pluralist assemblage constituencies of action. [40] The South at once seeks to recapture a pivotal position in the world order and reassert its contributions as a member of global society, beyond North-South flows of assistance or replicating conventional forms of development thought. [41]

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[36]   Simon Lewis and Marc Maslin, *Defining the Anthropocene*, Nature, Volume 519 (2015) 171-180, Macmillan, UK, 177

[37]   *See* Ashley Dawson, Extinction: A Radical History, O/R Books, New York (2016). *See also* Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900-1900 (New Edition)* Cambridge University Press (2004); Robert Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-First Century (Second Edition),* Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Co, Oxford (2007); and Christina Folke Ax et al (eds) *Cultivating the Colonies: Colonial States and their Environmental Legacies*, Ohio University Press, Athens (2011).

[38]   Susie O'Brien *Articulating a World of Difference: Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism and Globalization*, Canadian Literature 170/171 (Winter 2001) at 140-58.

[39]   Ibid

[40]   Connolly, 9.

[41]   *See generally* Ben Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos: Rethinking International Cooperation in a Complex World*, Oxford University Press (2013).

Mignolo posits two elements that would be pivotal in the evolution of human development theory and practice - 'dewesternization' as the re-emerging South struggles to rebalance global and local forms of knowledge and politics around agendas like ecological change, and 'decoloniality' as a practical force and act of agency to delink political, social and economic systems from 'the matrix of power' that shaped colonial and post-colonial eras and continues in many ways to underlying the modern development order. [42] Key to this process is an epistemic struggle to reclaim and shape core parts of the global order, including the paradigm of development and frameworks to address climate and ecological change. This is meant as a revalorization of the South sourced from its own experiences, and with a view to go beyond development as merely a form of Kantian cosmopolitanism. Engaging bottom-up solutions is not meant as a form of reverse Orientalism, a return to the past, or meant to run contrary to universality of the 2030 Agenda, but to "re-inscribe the past in the present, towards the future". [43] Rather it is a means of adapting development theory and practice in a way that engages diverse visions of the balance between people and planet and the evolving local contours of societal change.

c) China, India and the multi-polar world

At the forefront of emerging multi-polarity in the world are China and India, in some ways leading the re-emergence of the South in social, economic and ecological terms. As we consider the above themes of rethinking human development principles and engaging bottom-up solutions, a critical issue will be the extent to which countries like China and India will themselves infuse global normative frameworks with their evolving values and assertions as co-equal powers. As noted above, while holding the aura of universality, human development principles need adaptation to local constructs of nature and society if the 2030 agenda is to succeed. Agency in this context means creating new hybrid solutions between global and local, engaging the diversity of society as a foundation for sustainability. The evolution of concepts and paradigms in places like China and India can be a source of innovation and inspiration in this regard.

Beyond State policies and actions, efforts to create a new vision of sustainability is very much led in the South by civil society movements, calling into question traditional orthodoxy within development policy and practice. [44] Control over the environment has been central to state legitimacy and power in countries across the South, shaping the nature of governance, and influencing how sovereignty and statecraft function. But civil society movements are now driving a shift in policy orientation towards development policies and approaches that recognize the fundamental role of ecosystems as public goods. For poor and vulnerable communities in particular, a new vision of human development seeks a shift beyond a political-economy of exclusion and ecological decline, increasingly based on networking and connectivity among social movements. [45] Far from static, local norms are evolving and adapting in this process, with efforts

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[42]   Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity – Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Duke University Press, London (2011), 10-13.

[43]   Ibid at 49, 330-332.

[44]   *See* Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, US (2011).

[45]   *See* Connolly, 121-150.

across the South standing not as a return to past worldviews but rather a revalorization of plurality.

In the case of India, the world's largest democracy continues on its course of re-emergence as a global economic power, while also engaging the role of civil society and democratic governance to achieve goals of sustainability. India has seen a surge of grassroots community advocacy around issues of climate change, resource insecurity and ecological resilience, with large-scale protests across the country in recent years expressing the voice and vision of civil society. Rather than being a new issue, these tensions in society have deep roots in the sub-continent.

Many challenges facing communities have a long legacy in development policies enacted during the colonial era. Colonial systems of control were enacted under the veil of development and even claimed at times to address concerns over resource insecurity and ecological change, formalizing a 'tripartite alliance between political reality, revenue enhancement, and climate theory.' [46] The paradigms of progress initiated during the colonial era reverberated into contemporary Indian development policy. Modern India was in many ways born from the confrontation between nature and culture, with the modern developmental state arising with fundamental assumptions about the distinction between civilized and primitive, nature and culture, and so on. During independence, the underpinnings of modern development policy were not accepted by all in India, with many expressing a qualified acceptance, others with strong opposition.

The best known of those questioning future pathways was the father of modern India, Mahatma Gandhi. For Gandhi, the state's increasing mastery over nature was not the appropriate benchmark for measuring progress and civilization. [47] He called for a system based on self-reliance and justice, while not clinging to old structures; attempting to articulate an alternative to dominant post-colonial paradigms. The Gandhian vision was not about accepting the basic idea of progress inherent in the modernist vision but on India's own cultural traditions. It was a call for a full reinvention as an act of agency and self-awareness of the nation. Despite Gandhi's call to rethink development, India decided for the most part to take a pragmatic approach with a view to achieving rapid results for poverty reduction. An understanding of development as 'freedom from nature' became formalized through modern industrial regimes of development in the post-colonial era. Gandhi's call was set aside by some in power, but it continued to exercise a strong influence on the nation and civil society in particular.

An important inflection point in this regard was on 27 March 1973, in the small village of Mandal in the Garhwal region of the Indian Himalayas, when a community group gathered on state-owned forest land to prevent loggers from felling timber. [48] The agitation inspired a series of protests across the region and the Chipko movement was born. It called for a socially inclusive form of development that overturned the colonial policy of preserving nature through a purging

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[46] Gregory Barton, *Empire, Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism* (2002), 19.

[47] *See* T.N. Khoshoo and John Moolakkattu, *Mahatma Gandhi and the Environment* (2009) TERI Press, New Delhi.

[48] Ramachandra Guha, *How Much Should a Person Consume? Thinking through the environment,* Permanent Black, Rahniket (2006) at 55.

of all human contact. The birth of the Chipko movement catalyzed the emergence of many local social movements across India focused on forging a new balance between communities and ecosystems. [49] The 'tree huggers' from India's Himalayan foothills became symbols throughout the world that ecology and society should go hand-in-hand.[50] Understandings about humanity's relationship with the natural environment also shaped the nature of development and the state in India, and the reform of various national laws and institutions. In recent years, India has led the establishment of hundreds of environmental courts and tribunals across the nation, specifically dedicated to address growing calls by civil society for sustainability. The new vision and approaches emerging from these and other institutional innovations could well set a foundation in coming years for the way human development is understood, based on a hybridity of the vision of 'modern India' and local worldviews and bottom-up actions by social movements.

One important example of how the history of local activism and innovative rethinking of development can be applied to today's challenges is the 2017 landmark case of *Lalit Miglani v State of Uttarkhand* (Writ Petition PIL No.140) issued by the court on 30 March 2017.[51] In this public interest litigation brought in a local court in the Garhwal region of the Himalayas, the petitioner called on the State to recognize the existential threats to the region's ecosystems, and expand the concept of personhood and agency under the law by providing legal recognition to the region's ecosystems.

As decided by the High Court, the Garhwal ecosystem - its "rivers, streams, rivulets, lakes, air, meadows, dales, jungles, forests wetlands, grasslands, springs and waterfalls" – are now considered under the law as 'legal/juristic persons' entitled to legal rights on par with any natural person. "The rights of these legal entities shall be equivalent to the rights of human beings and the injury/ harm caused to these bodies shall be treated as harm/ injury caused to the human beings." The case followed a previous landmark case in which the same High Court of Uttarkhand declared as living entities the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers, which have their source in the glacial ecosystems of the Garhwal region.

In *Miglani*, the High Court held for the petitioner, ruling that the vital and unique Garhwal ecosystem is to be considered under the law as a biological living entity to be afforded full protection and rights to exist, sustain and regenerate its vital ecosystem functions and services. Ecosystems are to be considered as a "juristic person, like any other natural person, is in law also conferred with rights and obligations and is dealt with in accordance with law. In other words, the entity acts like a natural person but only through a designated person." The Court went on to note a number of institutions and intermediaries of the State to act as "loco parentis as the human face to protect, conserve and preserve" the ecosystem and serve as its guardian through legal action.

Through its ruling, the High Court found that an ecosystem is not a mere inanimate thing for humanity's use, but rather is a "scientifically and biologically living" entity for which the State "must recognize and bestow Constitutional legal rights". The Court established under the law an

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[49]   Archana Prasad, *Environmentalism and the Left: Contemporary Debates and Future Agendas in Tribal Areas* (2005), 12
[50]   Guha, above at 119
[51]   See http://www.harmonywithnatureun.org/content/documents/20170405Waterfalls_%20As_Legal_Persons.pdf

'impersonal agency' in ecosystems, holding that "[f]or a bigger thrust of socio-political-scientific development, evolution of a fictional personality to be a juristic person becomes inevitable. This may be any entity, living inanimate, objects or things."As noted by the Court, "[t]he very existence of the rivers, forests, lakes, water bodies, air and glaciers is at stake due to global warming, climate change and pollution….The past generations have handed over 'Mother Earth' to us in its pristine glory and we are morally bound to hand over the same Mother Earth to the next generation." Beyond deliberation on individual cases, the visions they express inspire and resonate with broader processes to redefine national laws and norms to overcome imperial legacies and reset the balance of nature and culture.

Just over the Himalayas, China is likewise grappling with many of the same tensions between its unflinching commitments to modernist development approaches alongside growing social movements and calls by communities for building social and ecological resilience. Having achieved one of the fastest rates of poverty reduction in history, many countries now look to China for inspiration on ways to adapt development pathways. The need to craft a new balance between economic, social and environmental concerns was reflected in unprecedented fashion in the 13th edition of China's Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), one in which China seeks to address emerging risks from climate change and ecological fragility to human development. This also comes in context of China's attempts to achieve a new 'ecological civilization' policy meant to re-calibrate the balance between nature and culture.

The vast majority of non-governmental organizations in China today are environmental NGOs, with a wave of vocal social movements in recent years calling into question the grand bargain of China's rapid march to 'modernity' which has created some of the world's fastest growing ecological risks. The signs of stress locally in China are evident as the climate changes and with ecosystem services such as clean air and water, productive land and natural resources increasingly seen by communities as public goods central to human development. Risks from climate change and ecological crisis are now driving debates on the need for a new vision and paradigm on the balance between humans and nature.

Mainstream paradigms of development in China have important legacies from Enlightenment worldviews of progress, industry and civilization being based on the march towards 'freedom from nature'. The modernist paradigm entered China in the late nineteenth century, and thereafter China began to marvel at the newfound control of nature resulting in more and more productive factories and infrastructure that became symbols of society's victory over nature.[52] Decades of application led to rapid industrial growth culminating in national slogans during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) that 'Man Must Conquer Nature' and 'Battling with Nature is Boundless Joy'. This was aligning to Marxist thought at the time that the more humans change the world around them, the more they become their true self. [53] The industrial revolution was a celebration of civilization, an expression of humanity's mastery over nature and a triumph of human nature.

In more recent years, as China has sought new ways to adapt its development pathway to ecological change, a revival of Chinese traditional concepts has emerged on the balance of

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[52]   Robert Weller, *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan*, Cambridge University Press (2005), 48.

[53]   Ibid, 49.

humans and nature, and the goal of finding hybridity between modernist principles and traditional concepts about balance and resilience. Notwithstanding a clear allegiance of the State to modernist modes of development policy and practice, alternative views are seeing a surge of interest as part of the effort to reshape development in an era of climate disruption and ecological change. Traditional Chinese conceptions of nature are now seen by many as a source of inspiration for recasting development paradigms, leading to new, creative forms of social and political thinking on the future of development.

The Ecological Civilization concept has arisen as a way forward. As noted by a leading Chinese official who helped establish the initial expressions of the concept, "[f]or the past century, China has studied the west and followed the western path of industrialization. And while three decades of reform and opening up have brought astounding economic achievements, China has also concentrated into those 30 years levels of pollution it took the west a century to create. China must not continue to follow in the footsteps of developed nations. Instead, it should take time re-examine western industrial civilization and its own cultural traditions."[54]

The concept first entered the national agenda in 2007 when it was put forward by the 17th National People's Congress (NPC), followed in 2012 by the 18th NPC incorporating it as one of its five guiding principles alongside principles on economic, social, political and cultural development.[55] It continues to have resonance as a primary frame of thought in China, with both the 2016 and 2017 Annual General Meetings of the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED), themed respectively on "Ecological Civilization: China and the World" and "Ecological Civilization in Action: A Common Green Future for a New Era".

The Ecological Civilization concept serves as a platform to "redefine the balance between humanity and the environment" so that "human prosperity can and should be achieved in a manner that respects the capacity of nature." [56] In advancing the approach, "[t]he existing development model needs to be fundamentally changed", with innovation needed in the nature of human development, resource use, production and consumption. "Accelerating the pursuit of ecological civilization is the main means for China to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" and "promote human progress within the carrying capacity of ecosystems." [57]

Furthermore, as a new center of leadership in the global community and with a growing development footprint around the world, the continued emergence of the ecological civilization concept can be of value not only for China, but for the world. With green initiatives emerging as part of China's official development assistance (ODA) the ecological civilization concept could emerge as a principle not only for local actions in China, but for China's ODA to developing countries in Asia, Africa and the Americas. [58] Historically, most of China's outward ODA has been focused on social and economic development

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54 Pan Yue, *Ecological wisdom of the ages*, **www.chinadialogue.net**. January 11, 2011, London, UK.

55 CCICED (2017), *Ecological Civilization: Shaping China's New Era*, China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED), Ministry of Environmental Protection, Beijing.

56 CCICED (2016) *South-South Cooperation for Ecological Civilization*, China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED), Ministry of Environmental Protection, Beijing, at iii.

57 Ibid, 2-3

58 *See* State Council of China, *White Paper on China's Foreign Aid*, State Council Information Office (2014), Beijing.

initiatives, building in many ways on the modern paradigms of development utilized by China itself. This includes the new Belt and Road Initiative, meant to revive Silk Road partnerships.

Engaging the ecological civilization principle can be an important opportunity to set green guidelines for China's outward investments. This would help ensure that China's expanding levels of outward cooperation do not result in a mere continuation and replication of business-as-usual models of development which have in many ways generated the planetary crisis. The pursuit of ecological civilization as part of China's international cooperation policy can be a key part of its soft power aspirations, promoting ecological civilization paradigm as a "model for many developing countries as they undergo industrialization." [59] Deepening the role of the paradigm in China's international cooperation policy can help China achieve its "responsibilities as a large country and its support to the implementation of 2030 Agenda" as well as "China's contribution to the improvement of global governance towards sustainable development."[60]

The evolution of development policy and practice in China has been characterized by an approach of moving gradually, summarized by the old Chinese saying, "crossing the river by feeling for stones." As noted by observers, the government has adopted a proactive approach to modernizing the state system in general, displaying great flexibility and adaptability in adjusting its institutions and practices.[61] The hope is that this record of adaptability can be applied to the historic challenge of adapting human development to an era of ecological change.

The process of re-emergence by countries like China and India is about economic vitality and a shift to a more multi-polar economic order, but it also about socio-cultural change. This could well have important bearings on the future of development policy and practice locally and globally, as China, India and other emerging economies continue their global ascent.

Conclusion

Development policy and practice is about more than treaties and global agendas. Equally important, the path to 2030 will be about social and cultural change, with ecological change emerging as a common concern of humanity, and a focus of "worldwide human commonality as a practical social force". [62] Just as scientific understandings of nature and the new discoveries that this understanding brought were a basis for Enlightenment thinking and the foundations for much of human development theory, so too is the new science of planetary change emerging as an overarching lens through which the world rethinks development. "A master science is, in part, the dominant scientific discipline of a historical epoch…More importantly, a master science generates and orders the concepts through which society understands itself and its relation to its surroundings." [63] Given the fundamental threat posed, ecological change is driving new thinking of what development means in the twenty-first century.

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[59]   CCICED (2016), at 3

[60]   Ibid, viii

[61]   *See* Yang Zheng, *Globalization and State Transformation in China*, Cambridge University Press (2004).

[62]   *See* Martin Shaw, *Theory of the Global State – Globality as Unfinished Revolution*, Cambridge University Press (2000).

[63]   Thomas Homer-Dixon, *The Newest Science*, Alternatives Journal, 35:4 (2009), 1.

Change is above all about transforming meaning of concepts such as freedom, civilization, nature and development. Planetary change is a basis for global society to unite around a common challenge, giving the idea of the global a core content beyond the process of inter-state relations, and catalyzing new relations between the state and society. The theoretical and practical frameworks of human development are evolving, as ecological change becomes a dominant force shaping world order.

For many practitioners, the assumption with the launch of the new 2030 Agenda, the SDGs and the Paris Agreement is that the disciplinary fundamentals are already set, and that the challenge remaining is one of implementation, through scaled-up green finance and clean technology. But development has always been a politically and culturally contested project. There is yet a path to be forged, to renew basic foundations of development policy beyond its inherited legacies of separation between nature and culture so as to meet the challenges of our time.