

# Foreword

by Amartya Sen

When as a young man, Prince Gautama, later known as Buddha, left his royal home in the foothills of the Himalayas in search of enlightenment, he was moved by the physical sight of mortality, morbidity, and disability, and was distressed by the ignorance he saw around him. Buddha did not lack wealth or status or authority, but his focus was on the priority of life and death, of health and illness, of education and illiteracy. He felt overwhelmed by the deprivations that human beings suffered across the world. This was some twenty-five hundred years ago. Buddha searched for his own way of dealing with these general problems, but those problems are central also to the focus of the “human development approach” (pioneered by Mahbub ul Haq two decades ago), which is now in much use in the evaluation of social change and progress.

The similarity is not, in fact, just a coincidence. Mortality, morbidity, ignorance, and other restraints on human lives are matters of universal concern for people all over the world, and have been so for thousands of years. Seen this way, the remarkable thing is not so much that the human development approach emerged when it did, but rather why it took so long for social evaluators and statisticians to take direct note of what interests people most. Why has there been such a long tradition of insisting on seeing human progress in terms of alienated variables distant from human lives, like the GNP (gross national product), which at best relate indirectly and imperfectly to human lives and freedoms?

There is, in fact, something of a gap here between the traditions of evaluative statistics, on the one hand, and views of progress, on the other, advanced by visionary social scientists. The basic importance of enriching the lives and freedoms of ordinary human beings has been a central concern in the social sciences for a very long time. This applies not only to insightful economists such as Adam Smith, but also to earlier writings, even to Aristotle, who argued in *Nicomachean Ethics* that “wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else.” We have to judge the success of a society, including its economy, not just in terms of national wealth or the ubiquitous GNP, but in terms of the freedoms and capabilities that people enjoy to live as they would value living.

If the human development approach has done a great deal across the world to reduce the artificial gap between what people really worry about and how their lives

are assessed in national statistics, the approach has been remarkably neglected in the United States in particular. This is especially striking since this country has an arrestingly sharp—and contrary—record of a major discrepancy between opulence and social achievement. The United States is, in most ways of counting, the wealthiest nation in the world, and yet its accomplishments in longevity, secure health, fine education, and other such basic features of good living are considerably below those of many other—often much poorer—countries. What is no less extraordinary is that the relative position of the United States has been steadily falling over the years as the powerful growth of the U.S. economy fails to be adequately translated into better lives for Americans, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The human development approach can be put to excellent use in America, both because that perspective is so important for the problems of this country and because the approach has been so widely neglected here.

This book makes a big contribution to meeting this neglect, and one hopes that it will be followed by further explorations of different aspects of American human development. It is, in fact, the first comprehensive study of the basic features of human development in the United States seen in a global context. As someone who has been involved, right from the start, in working with Mahbub ul Haq to develop the human development approach, it gives me the greatest of pleasure to write this foreword. Mahbub—a close lifelong friend whom I miss greatly since his untimely death in 1998—would have been delighted to see the fruits of his work being used with such dexterity and reach for assessing what is going on in the country with the highest economic opulence in the world without corresponding achievements in human development. He would have been pleased also by what William Draper III, the former administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (whose support to Mahbub was crucial for the beginning of his project), says in his own piece here, particularly his point about making “governments more accountable to the citizens.”

We get in this report not only an evaluation of what the limitations of human development are in the United States, but also how the relative place of America has been slipping in comparison with other countries over recent years. Also, in the skilled hands of Sarah Burd-Sharps, Kristen Lewis, and Eduardo Borges Martins, the contrasts within the country—related to region, race, class, and other important distinctions—receive powerful investigation and exposure. In these growing gaps we can also see one of the most important aspects of the souring of the American Dream, which is so much under discussion today.

I feel privileged to play a small part in placing this pioneering and powerful report before the American public and the increasingly vocal civil society—here and abroad. I do not doubt that the book will receive the huge attention that it richly deserves.

**Amartya Sen**  
Harvard University  
Nobel Laureate in Economics, 1998

# Foreword

by William H. Draper III

In America, when we hear the word “development,” we are likely to think either of fund-raising in the nonprofit arena or of bulldozers, cranes, and other heavy construction equipment. Yet from Africa to Asia, and from Latin America to parts of Europe, development is not fund-raising or construction, but strategies and action to fight poverty and create dynamic, growing economies.

For many decades, development focused exclusively on economic growth, trade, and investment. Over the last three decades, a new concept has gained traction, positing that while growth is absolutely necessary for development, it is not sufficient. The human development approach is based on the premise that people must be at the center of development. The aim is to offer people more choices and opportunities to make their own decisions for long, healthy, and creative lives. One variable is to have a sustainable livelihood and earn money, but there are other crucial variables, including the ability to live a long and healthy life, to have access to decent schooling, to participate in decisions that affect you, to live in a safe, clean environment and a stable community, and more.

From 1986 to 1993, I served as administrator of the United Nations Development Programme. A visionary economist, Mahbub ul Haq, who had served at the World Bank in Washington and as Pakistan’s minister of finance, came to me with an idea. He was very disappointed that the dominant strands of development thought were not translating into tangible improvements in people’s lives, and he wanted to research and write an annual report on the “state of the human condition.” By giving Mahbub sufficient financial resources, editorial independence, and intellectual freedom, I enabled him to work with a distinguished team of consultants, including his Cambridge University friend, Amartya Sen, who later received a Nobel Prize. In 1990, UNDP published the first *Human Development Report*, “Concept and Measurement of Human Development.” The report broke new ground with its controversial Human Development Index showing that some societies had achieved high levels of human development at modest income levels, and that others had not been able to translate their high income levels into commensurate levels of human progress. What were the policies that led to these results? This line of enquiry opened up an exciting, endless investigation that had ground-shaking implications for governments, the private sector, civil society

organizations, and individuals. The report helped to make governments more accountable to their citizens. Coinciding with the end of the Cold War, when a shift from military spending was possible, the report had an impact on the allocation of funds available for sustainable human development.

Several years after the first annual global *Human Development Reports*, a number of countries adopted this approach nationally. Now, seventeen years later, there are more than five hundred national and regional reports, using this well-honed tool to shed new light on factors inhibiting human development, and to explore realistic solutions.

The *American Human Development Report 2008–2009* is the first such report for the United States. It couldn't come at a better time. America is a country of unparalleled opportunity. We have vast natural resources, world-class institutions, and creative, compassionate, generous people. Yet we face mounting challenges in making ours a society that allows all of us to invest in ourselves and our families, and lead healthy, productive lives. Human development means more than the intrinsic value of personal fulfillment. An economy that hopes to stay competitive amid rapid globalization must draw on everyone's talents. The skills needed to compete tomorrow require concerted national investment in children and adults alike today. As this report documents, some entrenched problems are not going away, and some new trends can result in large numbers of Americans falling behind. We can, and indeed must, do better.

The good news is that progress is possible. History shows that Americans have been tremendously resourceful in developing practical policies in the public, private, and nonprofit arena to increase the likelihood that every person can live up to his or her full potential. New approaches to challenges in health care and the environment seem imminent. At the same time, corporate social responsibility is quickly becoming much more than window dressing, as American businesses, large and small, take action to protect our natural resources and invest in improving the lives of our people. Social entrepreneurs, moreover, are pursuing impressive, innovative approaches to social problems every day. This report provides a rich analysis that will help us forge ahead in creating more economic dynamism, more effective social policies, and an expansion of everyone's freedom and opportunities.

**William H. Draper III**  
Draper Richards L.P.