

## Human development and health in Brazil

It is very gratifying to be able to say that a new point of view is gradually gaining ground in Brazil and around the world, in terms of the description and, above all, analysis of collective problems from the perspective of human development. This is beginning to supersede the principles of the political economy, which prioritize wealth creation as the dominant or even exclusive criterion for evaluating the progress of the country, in such a way that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and its secondary indices, such as “*per capita*” income, could in themselves provide a snapshot of the level of development of a country, region or community. Thus, if the economy is going well, in principle everything is going well, as if this were a kind of energy that be changed into other forms of social, political, cultural and even ethical capital.

Historically, the world has never seen such growth. However, as a side effect of the intrinsic process of social exclusion, the world has never been more unequal. The distance in economic terms between countries, geographical regions, geopolitical blocs, social strata, ethnic groups, gender and the like has grown, producing apartheid, asymmetries and enclaves, in such a way that the a priori belief that economic progress should spread out horizontally like a semi-liquid substance, occupying every space and leveling out inequalities, has been shown to be a fallacy in both practical and conceptual terms.

As the unilateral belief in the magic of economics has run aground, the doctrine has emerged that development can be measured in various ways, which, although they amount to distinct specific indicators, are integrated into conjoined and interdependent processes. The economy, culture, policy, social structures and functions, territory and its resources, the environment, ethics, co-participation, subjectivity and sustainability, as things that all other features have in common, work together as joint prerequisites of human development.

The social and economic history of Brazil over the past century can be seen not only to illustrate but to be a paradigmatic case of this alternative approach. Going through various cycles, centered on raw materials, agriculture and industry, the country became a striking paradox, in that, in terms of gross domestic product, it ranks among the seven largest economies in the world, while, at the same time, it is one of the most unequal nations on the planet, ranking alongside Botswana, South Africa, Sierra Leone and other such countries that have been excluded from the process of progress and the development of well-being. In the long term, economic progress without collective well-being is a fallacy. And it was under this banner that Brazil and many other countries from the periphery had lived for two centuries, seeing themselves through the mirror of Adam Smith’s “Wealth of Nations”, conjuring up fleeting appearances that vanish into thin air, like the mirage of an oasis in the desert. Fortunately, human development has now been enshrined as one of the main guidelines for dealing with current challenges. And, in the light of this, it is encouraging to be able to note the great changes that the processes of health and disease have undergone in Brazil, in combination with economic advances and progress in education, which are the three mainstays of human development. The results recently published by the United Nations Program for Development (UNPD) leave no doubt that the country has succeeded in making impressive gains. We have moved from a poor Human Development Index (IDH) of 0.493 in 1991 to the status of a nation with a high level of human development of 0.727, as of 2010. The indicator relating to longevity, which is a proxy for good health, has attained the rank of “very high level of development”, with an index of 0.816. This is very revealing, since one of the most baleful discrepancies in the Brazil of the past, was that between a country nearing “First World” standards in economic terms, but languishing in the lower reaches of the rankings for health, alongside countries from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Education is still the sector that lags behind and drags down the HDI in Brazil. Yet, in relative terms, it is the item that has most improved, from a baseline of 0.279 to the current level of 0.637, an increase of 128%. In

short, over the past twenty years, the economy, which already was the most advanced sector, has grown 14%, longevity, as a health indicator, has increased 23%, while education, the most backward sector, has improved by 128%. These sectors are developing at different paces, from different baselines, but, taken together, show that Brazil is in a highly advantageous position in terms of meeting human development goals. Furthermore, the disparities between the north and south of the country, which once seemed as different as India and Belgium have, to a surprising extent, been ironed out. This optimistic outlook is further confirmed by the observation that, twenty years ago, most Brazilian municipalities (85%) had a low human development index, while today only 0.57%, or 32 of the 5,565 cities covered by the UNPD rank so low.

By way of conclusion, we can do no better than to cite the remarks of the representative of the United Nations Development Program, Jorge Chediek when he says that “Brazil has seen extraordinary progress in terms of health, education and income distribution. This shows that it is possible, in a short period of time, for a country to improve its social conditions”.

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