

## **Development and participation: whose participation?**

### **A critical analysis of the UNDP's participatory research methods**

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#### **Abstract**

*Participatory development became a new development orthodoxy during the early 1990s. However, many researchers have criticised that its implementation often fails to live up to its original transformative roots. Since 1992, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has published national and regional Human Development Reports through 'highly participatory research techniques'. This article analyses the participatory research methods promoted by the UNDP, its epistemological foundations and the knowledge–power dynamics within them. The inquiry finds that the local experts hired by the UNDP play a central role in articulating the top-down authority of the UNDP with the bottom-up legitimacy of the local perspectives. Rather than promote 'development by the people, for the people', the UNDP promotes 'development by the experts, for the people'.*

#### **Keywords**

Participatory development, UNDP, human development, adaptive preferences, knowledge–power, Foucault

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks to the reviewers for the comments and suggestions, and to Gemma Craske for her help.

## **INTRODUCTION: PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT**

Participation has been linked to development thinking since at least the early 20th century (Cornwall, 2006: 65). However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s it ascended to ‘the pantheon of development buzzwords’ (Leal, 2007: 539). It became synonymous with empowering the excluded to decide on and construct future solutions: a ‘new development orthodoxy’ (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001; Kapoor, 2005) that had ‘the potential to transform the role that poor people play in development by giving them voice and agency’ (World Bank, 2012). Since the 1990s, international development agencies, NGOs, academics and private institutions have employed participatory techniques in attempts to create a legitimate foundation for new development strategies and policies (Molenaers and Renard, 2003: 133; Mayoux and Chambers, 2005: 272; Apipoonyanon et al., 2019: 1). Between 2012 and 2015, for example, the United Nations Development Group promoted a global, participatory process called ‘The World We Want 2030’, in which ‘nearly two million people engaged in discussions on the global development framework (...), focused on what people see as necessary for their future’ (UNDG, 2015).

However, during the last two decades many critical researchers have denounced the concept of participatory development as it is currently implemented by some international development agencies, NGOs, decentralized public institutions and local governments with different aims – policymaking, project appraisal, budgeting, poverty assessment and evaluation, and so on – since it fails to live up to its original radical and transformative roots. These studies analyse ‘how, by whom and why spaces for participation are being opened or filled’ (Cornwall, 2002: 9), as well as ‘the techniques of power and the particular types of knowledge that the [participatory] methodology creates and reproduces’ (Kothari, 2001: 140). They conclude that, in many cases, participatory development is not giving ‘voice and agency’ to disempowered and excluded people. Instead it reproduces power dynamics that impede transformation (Cornwall, 2002; Enns, Bersaglio, & Kepe, 2014; Henkel & Stirrat, 2001; Kothari, 2001; Nagoda & Nightingale, 2017; Tschakert et al., 2016), depoliticises development debates (Chhotray, 2007; Green, 2010; Kapoor, 2005; Korf, 2010; Williams, 2004), adopts neoliberal and Eurocentric tenets that impede true collective and local transformation (Carroll & Jarvis, 2015; Cornwall, 2011; Cornwall & Fujita, 2012; Leal, 2007; Miraftab, 2004; Mohan & Stokke, 2000; O’Meally, 2014; Tuhiwai, 2012), and

generally constructs spaces in which knowledge and power are imposed from the top down rather than from the bottom up (Caretta and Riaño, 2016; Janes, 2016; Mosse, 2001).

Coinciding with the rise of participatory processes in development, the emergence of the UNDP's Human Development Framework in the early 1990s, shifted the development debate away from purely economic trends after a decade of neoliberal and conservative development thinking led by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Browne, 2011: 40-1; Fukuda-Parr & Kumar, 2009: xxii; Hirai, 2017: 18; Murphy, 2006: 2; Ponzio & Ghosh, 2016: 14; Stokke, 2009: 344). The UNDP's approach proposed re-centring the development debate on people and their well-being, and understanding development in terms of freedom and individuals' capabilities to choose and act: 'human development is a process of enlarging people's choices' (UNDP, 1990: 10). Soon 'participation' and 'empowerment' became central elements of the new theoretical framework, and the UNDP started elaborating national and regional HDRs using 'highly participatory research techniques' (UNDP, 2006b). However, despite the remarkable influence the UNDP's Human Development Framework and HDRs had over international development strategies and planning during the last three decades, the participatory research techniques it implements to produce the national and regional reports have received little attention from the academic community. To fill this gap, the research in this article focuses on these 'highly participatory research techniques' and on how the UNDP understands the link between development and participation.

To do so, the following analysis draws on Michel Foucault's work on the knowledge-power dynamics involved in social relations, which inspired many critical approaches to participatory development – e.g., Henkel & Stirrat, 2001; Kothari, 2001; Egbo, 2012; Tucker, 2014. However, none of these analyses describes participatory dynamics as an example of the power technique Foucault called 'the confession' (*The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality I*, 1976). In the following pages, the UNDP's participatory methods are depicted as an example of this power technique. The analysis makes explicit these subtle power dynamics, where local experts play a pivotal role in the articulation of top-down authority and bottom-up legitimacy.

The first section of the article explains the theoretical and methodological aspects of the study. The second section analyses the steps of the participatory process and explains

the epistemological basis of the research methods promoted by the UNDP. Since these methods rely on traditional epistemological tenets that neglect the existence of power relations within the process of creating the reports, the third section highlights the Foucauldian power–knowledge dynamics that such participatory methods reproduce. Then, it analyses the top-down authoritative and bottom-up legitimating power relations in the elaboration of the reports. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the theoretical contradiction that pervades the participatory practices promoted by the UNDP.

### **ANALYSING THE UNDP’S PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHODS: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

This section explains the theoretical link between participation and the human development framework to introduce the research question that structures the article. Then reflects on the difficulties to answer that question and presents the methodological approach that guides the critical analysis below.

#### **Participation: development ‘by the people’**

Participation has been a central element of the human development paradigm since the publication of the first global HDR, where the UNDP defined human development as ‘a participatory and dynamic process’ (UNDP, 1990: 11). In 1993, the UNDP adopted participation as a general development strategy because it ‘enables people to gain for themselves access to a much broader range of opportunities’ (UNDP, 1993: 21). The global report that year focused on participation and highlighted the fact that after the Cold War, the world was experiencing ‘a profound human revolution that makes people's participation the central objective in all parts of life’ (UNDP, 1993: 8). With the adoption of ‘empowerment’ as one of ‘the four essential components of the human development paradigm’ (UNDP, 1995: 12), the UNDP set the link between participation, empowerment and human development that would guide the work of the Human Development Reports Office for the following decades. The global 2002 and 2010 HDRs, for example, noted that ‘participation and other human development gains can be mutually reinforcing’ (UNDP, 2002: 53) and that ‘fully realising the human development agenda requires (...) enabling people to be active participants in change’ (UNDP, 2010: 9).

The link between participation and the human development paradigm relies on the very theoretical foundations of the latter. Since ‘human beings are both the means and the end of development’ (UNDP, 1990: 14), the human development paradigm emphasises that they are not exclusively the receptors of development actions (development *for* the people), but also active agents who shape their own future (development *by* the people).<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the human development framework agrees with the participatory development advocates of the late 1980s and early 1990s in holding that participation makes it possible to turn paternalistic top-down approaches that official programmes tend to favour into strategies, plans and practices by the people (UNDP 1993: 89). That is why the global report from 2016 states that development is ‘by the people’ if it promotes their ‘active participation in the processes that shape their lives’ (UNDP, 2016: 2), as exemplified by participation in public debates (UNDP, 2016: 8).

The experts consulted during the study presented in this article (see methodological explanations below) explain that the participatory research methods promoted by the UNDP for the elaboration of national and regional HDRs are sometimes more important than the publication of the reports themselves, since key development actors, such as policy makers, engage in the debates and the discussions. The UNDP agrees: ‘reports—*and the process of preparing them*—can trigger broad discussions in a country or region that bring together many disparate voices’ (UNDP, 2019: 0, emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

That is to say, it is the very process and not just the resulting report, which is inherently an important advocacy tool that influences national and regional development policies. Hence, the research question in this article. If development ‘by the people’ implies that ‘people must participate in the decisions and processes that shape their lives’ (UNDP, 1995: 12, Box 1.1), the elaboration of the national and regional reports could be an opportunity to let people directly participate in the debates and processes that influence national and regional development policies, and thus, their lives. However, is there solid evidence to affirm that the participatory practices promoted by the UNDP—the research

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<sup>1</sup> The UNDP’s participatory motto is ‘development of the people, for the people and by the people’. Although ‘the people’ is a complex and abstract category, the UNDP does not explain its meaning in the human development reports. To avoid ambiguity and lack of clarity, I exclusively use this category when I quote the UNDP’s documents and when I paraphrase its motto.

<sup>2</sup> The UNDP’s online toolkit (see UNDP 2019 in the references) is divided into 4 parts—from 0 to 3—and many subparts. The in-text citations indicate the part and subpart from which the quote was extracted.

methods—are coherent and consistent with the motto ‘development *by* the people, *for* the people?’ Do local people participate directly – in an unmediated way – in the elaboration of the national and regional HDRs? To answer this question, the article contrasts how participation is understood, 1) within the human development theoretical framework, and 2) in the ‘participatory research techniques’ used to produce the national and regional HDRs. The following section describes the methodological approach used to answer this question.

### The publication of national and regional HDRs

Since 1990, the UNDP has published a global HDR every year since, except 2007, 2012, 2017 and 2018. In 1992, the UNDP began publishing national and regional reports and, as shown in Figure 1, has already published more than 750 national and regional reports from 135 countries.<sup>3</sup> The exponential growth of national and regional HDRs between 1992 (2 reports) and 1998 (79 reports) is noteworthy and coincides with the adoption of participation and empowerment in 1993 and 1995 as central characteristics of the human development framework.

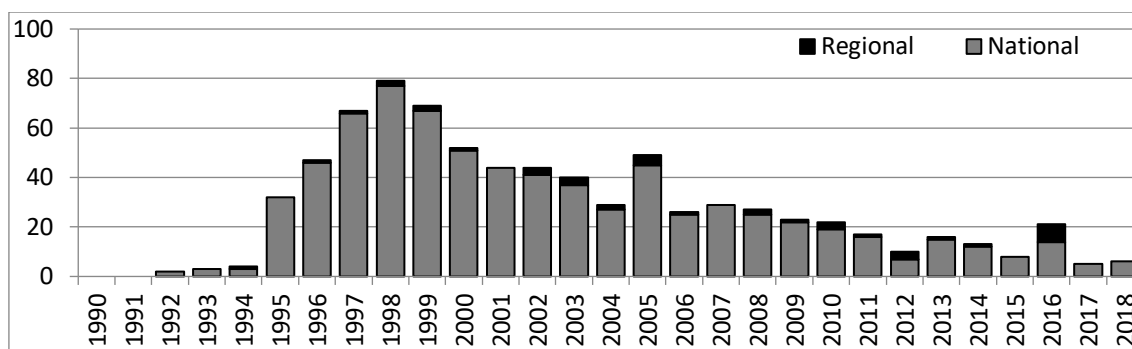


Figure 1. Number of national and regional HDRs published by year (based on UNDP data)

Unlike the global HDRs, which are written at the UNDP’s headquarters in New York, the national and regional reports are produced by ad hoc local teams under the supervision of the UNDP. This means that these practices are carried out in parallel in

<sup>3</sup> All the HDRs (global, national and regional) are available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports>. In Figure 1, subnational reports (four in 2004 and one in 2005) are grouped with national ones.

many different places all over the world. Between 2016 and 2018, for example, more than 30 national and regional reports were published in Timor-Leste, Ghana, Serbia, Moldova, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Lesotho, Mongolia and Guatemala, among others.

The UNDP is aware that ‘each national and regional human development report is different in scope, analysis and background’ (UNDP, 2019: 0). To manage their elaboration in a flexible way, the Human Development Report Office produced internal documents to guide local teams in writing these reports. These documents describe the institutional architecture and the participatory research process for the elaboration of the reports. They advise on ‘the key steps and decisions that are required during the preparation of every report’ (UNDP, 2019: 0)—how to select the theme of the report, how to find resources and build the ad hoc team, how to write the content and how to communicate the findings in order to have impact and influence. As I explain below, these internal documents are essential for the study presented in this article. However, I will first explain what actors participate in the creation of the reports and what their role is.

### **The participatory institutional architecture**

Four different actors take part in the research process for the elaboration of the reports.

(1) The *UNDP* is the central figure: it does not write the reports itself, but it does promote and oversee their elaboration and provides funding, institutional coverage, guidance, expertise and knowledge. (2) The *HDR team*, a team of local experts created ad hoc for the elaboration of the report, conducts the research and drafts the report. (3) Many other *national and international development experts and institutions* (who do not participate in the HDR team or work for the UNDP) exchange information with and advise the HDR team or contribute funds or other kind of resources. They are typically ‘governments, the UN system, universities, NGOs and other partners’ (UNDP, 2006b). (4) The fourth actor is *local people and institutions* who are not development experts; this includes the general public, students and non-expert teachers at universities and schools, local communities, media, local institutions not focused on development issues, and so on.

Figure 2 represents the architecture of the participatory research process. The aforementioned actors are distributed into different typologies depending on the scope

of their contribution (left axis: global vs local/regional) and their expertise on development issues (right axis: development experts vs non-experts). Hence, we find three different categories: global experts in level 1, local experts in level 2, and local non-experts in level 3. These boundaries are blurry, changing and permeable. The UNDP is connected in manifold ways to other institutions and individuals that collaborate with (or even work for) the organisation sporadically and in a flexible way. However, these fuzzy boundaries are one of the most important assets of the UNDP, which increases ‘the trust of the developing world and (...) its power’ (Murphy, 2006: 260).

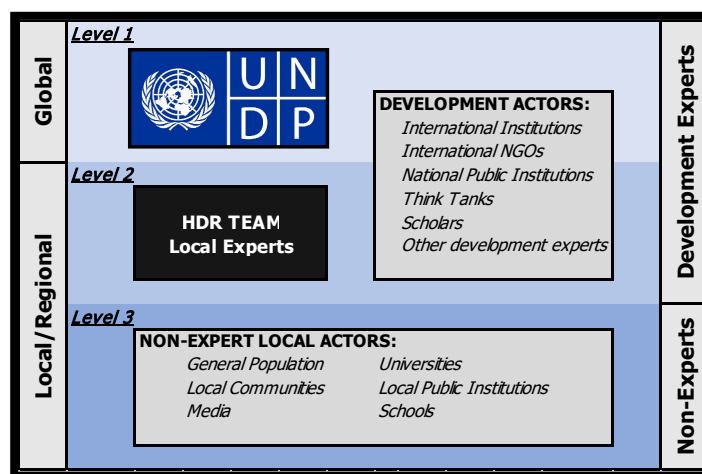


Figure 2. The architecture of the participatory research process

### How to analyse the participatory research techniques promoted by the UNDP?

As pointed out above, this article studies the link between participation and development in the UNDP’s discourse. It contrasts, 1) how the UNDP conceives *the link between development and participation* within the human development framework, and 2) how it *understands and promotes participatory research methods* for the elaboration of the national and regional HDRs. Accordingly, this article does not analyse the concrete cases of the implementation of these research methods by the national and regional UNDP offices and the ad hoc teams of experts for two reasons. The first is that by analysing a few of these concrete practices the sample would be too reduced (two or three cases out of more than 750) to extract solid conclusions. Moreover, each national and regional report is produced in very different contexts, where a variety of factors can influence and condition the concrete process of creation.



It would be difficult to discern the influence of the UNDP's understanding of participation from among many other cultural, social, political, and geographical influences. The second is that such an analysis would not answer the research question posed in this article. The research question focuses on how the UNDP articulates 'participation' within its theoretical framework, and on how it thinks participatory research methods should be implemented, regardless of real implementation in concrete cases. The case study in this inquiry is the UNDP's discourse and its internal coherence. For that reason, this article analyses the steps, procedures, norms, rules and advice that the Human Development Report Office of the UNDP established over time to guide the elaboration of these reports. To do so, the analysis relies on two main sources.

First, the documents the UNDP published over time to guide and assess the participatory elaboration of the national and regional HDRs. More concretely, the online toolkit that describes and explains the steps and decisions required for the elaboration of the reports;<sup>4</sup> and the publications where the UNDP evaluates the influence and impact of the national and regional reports.<sup>5</sup> Second, to contrast the findings in these documents with the insights of the experts involved in the practical implementation of concrete cases, the study entailed a survey of many of these experts. To do that I contacted 40 members of the local HDR teams who were involved in writing 20 national or regional reports published in 2015 and 2016.<sup>6</sup> The survey, conducted between November 2017 and April 2018, consisted of two phases. First, I designed a questionnaire that posed eight open questions about: 1) experts, 2) expertise, 3) data and information, 4) inclusive participation, 5) ownership, 6) empowerment, 7) impact and influence, and 8) other comments (a blank space for further comments). I received

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<sup>4</sup> Available at <http://dev-hdr.pantheonsite.io/en/country-reports>

<sup>5</sup> Reports published by the UNDP's Independent Evaluation Office and the Human Development Reports Office, referenced below as UNDP 2006a, UNDP 2006b, UNDP 2007 and UNDP 2015.

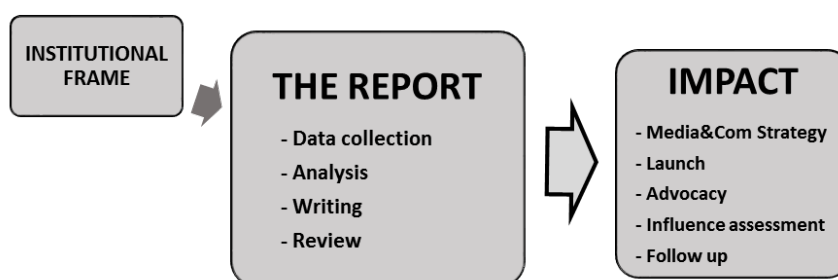
<sup>6</sup> The 20 reports covered different countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. In average, the HDR teams are formed by 5 to 7 experts. This means that I surveyed 40 of the (more or less) 120 experts participating in the elaboration of these national and regional HDRs published in 2015 and 2016. According to the nature of the local HDR teams, all of the participants are local (national) experts. The selection of these 40 experts depended on the availability of the information to contact them: at least one expert taking part in the elaboration of each of the 20 reports was contacted. The answers were anonymous: however, according to their comments in the open questions, experts from every continent participated in the survey.

eleven responses that enriched the information I extracted from the analysis of the UNDP documents. Then, in the second phase, I extracted seven key ideas from the responses given in the first phase, and designed a survey in which the respondent had to rate the level of agreement with each idea. I also added a blank space for further comments. I sent it to the same 40 participants and received responses from 27—Annex 1 shows results of the second phase.

To critically analyse this information, in the following section I analyse the epistemological tenets of the UNDP’s research methods.

### **THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL TENETS OF THE PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROCESS**

The online toolkit divides the participatory research process into three general steps: ‘Starting a Report’, where the institutional architecture and management structures for the whole process are created; ‘Preparing a Report’, where the necessary data is collected and analysed, and the report is written; and ‘Making an Impact’, where a media and communication strategy and an advocacy plan are designed and implemented. This section, analyses the participatory research process, focusing on the preparation of the report and the advocacy and communication strategies. The analysis shows the contribution each participant makes and the epistemological research assumptions by the UNDP. Following that, next section focuses on the institutional architecture and analyses how it conditions the research process.



*Figure 3. The steps of the participatory research process*

### **‘Preparing the Report’ and ‘Making an Impact’**

Data collection is the first step in preparing the national and regional HDRs. The UNDP prioritises the use of statistical data because ‘sound statistical analysis provides the foundation for all work supported by the UNDP’ and ‘allows [us] to identify and respond to local development needs, to advocate for change, and to track our progress as we work to help people build a better life’ (UNDP, 2007: Foreword).

In order to save time and resources, the UNDP recommends gathering already existing statistical data: ‘a sound methodology for comprehensive data collection’ implies, first, conducting a survey of the already existing data on the HDR’s theme, and second, establishing institutional partnerships on data issues with national and international statistics agencies (UNDP, 2019: 2).

Once the data has been collected, the HDR team interprets it and extracts the information to prepare the content of the reports. The UNDP affirms that the success of a report depends especially ‘on the capacity of the core HDR team to interpret local conditions in terms of human development concepts and principles’ (UNDP, 2019: 1.3, Box 2). For that reason, it recommends forming the team with ‘eminent local experts’ with expertise on ‘the theme and the local context, professional reputation and technical skills’ (UNDP, 2019: 1.3) – and preferably with a PhD-level degree in their field of expertise.<sup>7</sup> These experts are often ‘among the most distinguished social scientists in that part of the world’ (Murphy, 2006: 250).

Two more groups help the HDR team members with the interpretation of the data. On the one hand, the UNDP urges the HDR team to organise consultations with other global and local experts—such as UNICEF, the World Health Organisation and the World Bank, as well as national non-governmental development actors—‘for their views and expertise, data, experiences and useful case studies’ (UNDP, 2019: 2.1). On the other hand, as the statistical methods used to prepare the reports are complex and beyond the reach of non-specialists, the UNDP proposes a statistics advisory group collaborate with the HDR team ‘to provide intellectual and technical advice and guidance to the writing team. (...) To ensure credibility and influence, it should consist

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<sup>7</sup> As stated in the Terms of Reference for the HDR team members, available at <http://hdr.undp.org>.

of key experts from national statistics agencies, the relevant regional statistics commissions, academia and policy think tanks' (UNDP, 2007: 7).

Finally, the members of the HDR team write the content and the key messages of the report. In this way, they produce recommendations that 'will promote public debate on development issues and (...) advocating for government initiatives to foster human development' (UNDP, 2019: 2.1). The UNDP stresses the strategic importance of this step. It affirms that it has a good reputation 'as a neutral agency' (UNDP, 2015: Foreword) and that the HDRs generate neutral and ideology-free spaces for debate (UNDP, 2015: xxiv, 48). This is an important asset for the organisation, in that 'the reports can be especially helpful to an organisation like UNDP that wishes to maintain an influential, yet apolitical, presence in a country or region' (UNDP, 2019: 0). In order to perpetuate this influential, yet neutral and apolitical position, the HDR team members 'are expected to show objectivity in the arguments and conclusions of the report' (UNDP, 2019: 1.3; UNDP, 2006b). Prior to publication, the draft report is submitted to reviews by both internal and external experts (UNDP, 2019: 2.3)

Once the report is published, the UNDP implements several strategies 'to generate public interest and mobilise action' (UNDP, 2019: 1.4). These strategies are: a Media and Communication Strategy 'to spread awareness of the findings and recommendations of the HDR as widely as possible so as to impart fresh knowledge (...) to advance human development' (UNDP, 2019: 3.1); a Plan to 'launch, market and distribute the HDR' (UNDP, 2019: 3.2); an Advocacy Strategy 'to promote the principal messages of the HDR' and to 'undertake resource mobilisation to support projects based on HDR recommendations' (UNDP, 2019: 3.3); and the use of different mechanisms to implement a long-term follow-up and to assess the influence of the reports.

### **Whose participation?**

The analysis above shows that the participatory research methods promoted by the UNDP rely almost exclusively on the participation of national and international experts (in levels 1 and 2 in Figure 2). The collection and analysis of the data, the writing and reviewing of the reports, the design and implementation of the different strategies to diffuse the content of the reports, etc. depend on the work of experts.

During the process of preparing the report, local non-expert people rarely have a direct influence on the definition of the content and the key messages in the reports. On the contrary, the description of their living conditions—‘including the economic context, the characteristics of the population (the social context, minorities, gender issues, conflicts, health, education, livelihoods), resource issues, the environment, foreign relations and so on’ (UNDP, 2019: 2.2)—is realised through the use of already existing data. Participatory qualitative assessments, in which non-experts directly contribute their perspectives and insights, are secondary and subsidiary (2007: 10-11). The UNDP states that ‘*in some cases, it is not enough* for HDR teams to collect data on marginalised groups – they should *also* involve them in the report preparation’ (UNDP, 2007: 85, emphasis added).

The document *Ideas, Innovation, Impact* (UNDP, 2006b), in which the UNDP shows 24 examples of national and regional HDRs that were especially successful in terms of impact and innovation, offers a noteworthy example of the lack of participation by local non-experts. The UNDP describes the local teams participating in the elaboration of these successful reports: these teams include leading intellectuals, renowned scholars, prominent academics, national experts and specialists, prominent national figures, leading research institutes, influential academic and development institutions, private think tanks, and so on. Only two reports (out of 24) mention that local leaders took part in the HDR team.

This participatory logic does not change after the publication of the reports: ‘Chapter authors, experts who have provided case studies, academics who have attended meetings: all are valuable in spreading a report’s messages among their colleagues and beyond’ (UNDP, 2019: 3.3). Local non-experts—those in level 3, such as media, beneficiaries, university students, local communities, other public institutions, and so on—are considered mere receivers of the messages: ‘wide distribution [of the published reports] can promote dialogue and debate around the theme from a people’s perspective rather than solely among experts’ (UNDP, 2019: 3.2). In other cases they are viewed as effective communication channels to reach a broader audience: ‘In Colombia, after the launch of the 2003 HDR, training was provided to 60 representatives who then fanned out across the country to explain the report findings in communities’ (UNDP, 2019: 3.3).

The UNDP affirms in the global HDRs that ‘informed decisions require input from the people affected by them and cannot rely solely on “expert knowledge”’ (UNDP, 2002: 55). Since both the process for publishing the reports and the reports themselves are intended to influence the decisions and policies that change people’s lives, participatory research methods should not rely exclusively on experts. However, the analysis so far shows that the excluded people do not directly participate in the elaboration of this advocacy tool. Instead, the research process relies on the participation of local experts.

### **The Epistemological Shift and the Adaptive Preferences**

Development researchers’ and practitioners’ interest in participatory methods in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a reaction to the ‘mainstream development’s neo-colonial tendencies, Western-centric values and centralised decision-making processes’ (Kapoor, 2005: 1203) that is characteristic of development practices in previous decades. It was a commitment to democratic praxis intended to decolonise knowledge production by giving ‘the poor’ a voice and choices (Cornwall, 2006, 2008; Janes, 2016). From these researchers’ perspective, participatory development needed an *epistemological shift*, to make ‘the poor’ the subject of knowledge, not the mere researched object. This shift sought to overcome the Eurocentric understanding of knowledge production, where *culturally* impregnated knowledge and research techniques – and those who use them – are supposed to embody the *natural* progress of humankind (Tuihawai, 2012: 2, 58). It aimed to challenge the very premises on which social science research methodology was created:

[The premises] of neutrality and objectivity, and the possibility of value-free inquiry. (...) The distance between the researcher and the researched, the dichotomy of the subject and the object, the reliance on statistical and quantifiable techniques—all were subjected to comprehensive critique (Tandom 2011: 88).

In order to debunk hierarchical research relationships and create inclusionary spaces to co-produce knowledge, such an epistemological shift implies: *co-determination* as a way to ‘involve research participants in all stages of knowledge production, from identifying the research problem to latter phases of data collection, data analysis, and data distribution’; *reflexivity* to detect the power relations within the research process

and to reflect on how they influence the process and the outcome; and *positionality* to situate the researcher and to detect its influence on the produced knowledge (Caretta and Riaño, 2016: 2-3).

The analysis above shows that the UNDP did not adopt such epistemological shift. On the contrary, the results of the survey show that the UNDP and the HDR teams work within the traditional epistemological framework in, at least, three key aspects. First, *statistical and quantifiable techniques* provide the foundation for the UNDP's work and are central in the elaboration of the content and the key messages of the reports. HDR team members interviewed during the first phase of the survey confirm that 'already existing statistical data is the raw material of the draft reports,' and the survey shows that 86% of the consulted experts agree with the idea that empirical, objective data increases trust in the HDRs (question 3). Second, the UNDP affirms that the reports are *neutral and ideology free*, and that their content, message and conclusions aim to be *objective*. The survey shows that 83% of the consulted experts agree with the idea that HDRs are generally respected because they aim to be neutral and impartial (question 2).<sup>8</sup> Finally, the research process reproduces the *subject-object divide*, where the subject observes the object (local people, their living conditions and needs) through statistical data and produces neutral and objective reports.

These three aspects show an apparent contradiction in the elaboration of the national and regional HDR. On the one hand, the human development framework champions the direct participation *of the people* in the processes and debates that could influence their lives. On the other hand, the UNDP relies on a traditional epistemological approach and seeks objectivity and impartiality through the knowledge produced *by the experts* using quantitative statistical data and methods.

When asked about this apparent contradiction, interviewed experts participating in the elaboration of the HDRs refer to 'adaptive preferences.' Defenders of Amartya Sen's capabilities approach explain that deprived and excluded people tend to adapt their preferences to their harsh living conditions, so they end up naturally accepting circumstances that an external observer would define as unacceptable. These adaptive

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<sup>8</sup> Two of the interviewed experts explained that the reports are neutral and impartial in terms of national politics, not in terms of championing the human development framework. For example: 'The [HDR] team never favours one political party over another: we never take side in that sense. We are impartial. (...) It does not matter if the government is conservative, progressive or nationalist: we always promote human development.'

preferences are usually described as a non-autonomous cognitive bias that cannot be treated as authoritative judgements about well-being (Hirai, 2017: 135; Khader, 2009: 169). In this sense, the judgement by an external (expert) observer is considered more authoritative than the voice of the deprived and excluded one. The UNDP embraces this position when it describes adaptive preferences as follows:

The mechanism people use to adjust their preferences according to their circumstances. The frequently unconscious adaptation of preferences *distorts* perceptions of freedom so that individuals may not notice that their freedom of choice has been constrained (UNDP, 2016: 92, emphasis added).

From this perspective, it is assumed that since excluded people's preferences may be distorted, their direct participation in the elaboration of the national and regional HDRs would not be satisfactory and effective. Accordingly, the direct participation of educated and informed experts is more pertinent and fruitful.

HDRs play an advocacy role relying on factual – not subjective – evidence. (...) The human development approach does not take people's voices at face value in fear of the problem of adaptive preferences (HDR Team member, first phase of the survey).

The sections below offer an alternative explanation for the contradiction explained above and the lack of participation of excluded people in the research process for the elaboration of the reports. In the following, the article shows that rather than a methodological issue, the lack of participation responds to the top-down authoritative logic of the research methods designed by the UNDP.

## **KNOWLEDGE–POWER RELATIONS WITHIN THE INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROCESS**

The notion of empowerment—that is, giving or redistributing power or authority, enabling, or providing the ability to influence—is solidly linked to the concept of participation. Participatory processes can generate inclusive bottom-up political dynamics that promote local ownership and empowerment (Kapoor, 2005: 1203). They can change the way power is exerted or distributed during the participatory process and afterwards, in order to include the excluded (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Mirafab, 2004;



Mohan & Stokke, 2000). The UNDP agrees with the link between participation and empowerment, noting that ‘since participation requires increased influence and control, it also demands increased empowerment.’ It proposes an ‘empowerment test’ for any proposal aiming to increase participation: ‘does it increase or decrease people's power to control their lives?’ (UNDP, 1993: 21). However, the UNDP’s guidelines, online toolkit and other documents consulted for this research neglect the existence of power relations *in the process of elaboration of the national and regional HDRs*.

In contrast, the sections below take a Foucauldian perspective where there is no ‘outside of power’: every social relation implies a power dynamic that is systematically strengthened if it is not detected, challenged and disrupted (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1991: 6). To make these knowledge–power dynamics explicit, my analysis focuses on the institutional architecture and management structures that govern the participatory research process. The analysis shows that they establish a structure of knowledge–power relations that conditions the discursive field wherein the reports are created. They also enable new forms of power that mask ‘how asymmetrical (...) relations are reproduced’ (Lie, 2019: 1108). The following sub-sections first present the power technique that Foucault called ‘the confession’ and then show that the UNDP’s participatory methods reproduce such a technique. I end this section by analysing the roles of different actors in terms of power.

### **Michel Foucault and the Confession**

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality I* (1976), Michel Foucault criticises the functioning of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent by showing how their practices and certainties are contingent and partial. He analyses social standardised practices where knowledge is produced and explains how they subtly reinforce and strengthen already existing power structures. Rather than explicitly enacting domination and control over the subject submitted to such *external* power techniques, these knowledge–power *internal* dynamics perpetuate subtle domination structures that are ‘freely’ accepted by individuals (Foucault, 1990).

The ‘confession’ is one of these standardised practices. Foucault presents it in *The Will to Knowledge* and claims that it is ‘one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth’ (Foucault, 1990: 59). He describes it as follows:

[A] ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it (...); and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it (...) (Foucault, 1990: 61-62).

We find four key elements in the confession: the authority, the subject, a self-produced discourse and the expected modification. The role of *authority* is central to the confession. Foucault declares that the truth does not reside solely in the subject who reveals it. Rather, it is constituted in two stages: ‘present but incomplete, blind to itself, in the one who spoke, it could only reach completion in the one who assimilated and recorded it. It was the latter's function to verify this obscure truth’ (Foucault, 1990: 66). For that reason, the authority, the one who listens, is ‘the master of truth’ (Foucault, 1990: 67). The authoritative other masters the subject’s discourse and transforms it into true knowledge (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982: 180). Hence, the agency of domination resides ‘in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know’ (Foucault, 1990: 62).

The other side of the power relation within the confession is the *speaking subject*. He is ‘the subject of the statement’ (Foucault, 1990: 61), that is to say, the one who speaks about himself. Foucault states:

By virtue of the power structure immanent in it, the confessional discourse cannot come from above (...) through the sovereign will of a master, but rather from below, as an obligatory act of speech (Foucault, 1990: 62).

The speaking subject’s narration is the truth that the authority assimilates, records and verifies. Foucault stresses that for the confession to work, the subject has to assume that the resulting discourse is *a self-produced truth*, and that it becomes part of his identity and enables him to recognise himself. The confession marks the subject ‘by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him’ (Foucault, 1982: 212). The key element of an effective confession is not the coercion exerted by the listener (the authority), but the conviction of the speaking subject.

Finally, the confession produces ‘intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it,’ for it is a discourse of truth that ‘finally takes effect, not in the one who receives it, but in the one from whom it is wrested’ (Foucault, 1990: 62). The confession enables a medicalisation of the speaking subject by defining what is normal and what is not. Foucault explains that ‘the obtaining of the confession and its effects were recodified as therapeutic operations (...) under the rule of the normal and the pathological’ (Foucault, 1990: 67). The confession aims to adapt the pathological speaker to the norm.

### **A self-produced discourse intended to generate modifications**

The participatory research method designed by the UNDP reproduces a confessional process intended to produce a discourse—namely, the content and messages of the reports—and to generate modifications in terms of policies and general attitudes towards the human development framework. There are clear parallels between the creation of the national and regional reports and the confession as explained by Foucault:

1) Both Foucault and the UNDP agree that the effectiveness of the process relies on the acceptance of the generated discourse by the speaking subject. However, in the case of the HDRs, ‘self-produced discourse’ is translated into ‘ownership’:

National or regional ownership and wide participation help ensure that an HDR responds to local needs and expectations (...). A report rooted in national perspectives inspires trust in the HDR. (...) The effectiveness of a HDR is reduced *if it is seen* as an internal UNDP document setting out internal positions or if it is driven by a donor agenda or a group agenda external to the needs of the country or region (UNDP, 2019: 1.3 Box 2, emphasis added).

In the survey conducted for this study, 90% of the respondents agreed that participation is the most important mechanism to promote local ownership of the reports (question 5).

2) The participation of the speaking subject is instrumental: a means to reinforce, without changing, an already existing power relation. The UNDP does not prize the participation of the speaking subject for his ability to restructure power relations (empowerment), but because ‘participatory mechanisms and consultations *promote local ownership* of the HDR process’ (UNDP, 2019: 2.1, emphasis added). That is why, for example, with regard to the formation of the HDR team the UNDP states that ‘preference may be given to eminent local experts *because this may add to the sense of*

*local ownership*' (UNDP, 2019: 1.3, emphasis added). For the UNDP, participatory mechanisms promote a sense of ownership, which, in due time, increases the impact of the reports (UNDP, 2019: 0).

3) The modification sought happens in the speaking subject, not in the one who listens. By implementing media and communication strategies and advocacy plans, the UNDP explicitly seeks behavioural changes—that is, modifications—in those whose voices are represented in the reports (stakeholders, policy makers and the general public):

The focus of the [communication] strategy is to spread awareness of the findings and recommendations of the HDR as widely as possible so as to impart fresh knowledge and *promote new forms of behaviour* to advance human development (UNDP, 2019: 3.1, emphasis added).

In the case of the national and regional HDRs, such a modification happens in two complementary ways: changes in people and in institutions. On the one hand, the communication strategy is addressed to the general public and seeks to spread the key messages of the report as widely as possible (UNDP, 2019: 3.1) to change public perceptions and attitudes towards certain political issues. On the other hand, the reports are used as 'dynamic advocacy tools' (UNDP, 2007: Foreword) and are intended to influence political decisions, such as development strategies and public policies and budgets (UNDP, 2019: 3.3). The following quote summarises such a dual effect:

Advocacy (...) involves ongoing, long-term efforts to influence public opinion and societal attitudes, while bringing about *changes* in government, community and institutional policies. With a focus on *educating people* (...), human development advocacy targets specific audiences through communication techniques guided by well-crafted strategies. It draws upon participatory processes, and offers *concrete solutions and plans of action* (UNDP, 2007: 79, emphasis added).

Questions 6 and 7 of the survey back this finding: there is a high level of agreement with the ideas that the communication strategy is important in changing people's attitudes (80 per cent), and that a successful HDR influences national policies and development strategies (87 per cent).

### **Who is the authority and who the speaking subject?**

The analysis so far shows that the UNDP's participatory research method reproduces Foucault's confession. However, it does not clarify who is the authority and who the speaking subject.

1) Who is the authority? Foucault states that the authority is the figure that assimilates and verifies the truth. The internal procedures for the elaboration of the reports state that the UNDP implements this task. The guidelines state that the UNDP staff 'should gauge the quality of the data; the soundness of the analysis; the openness, fairness and impartiality of the arguments; and the coherence and consistency of the recommendations' (UNDP, 2019: 2.3). Although the UNDP does not write the report, its sponsorship 'give(s) the ideas contained in the reports *greater authority*, and greater impact, than they otherwise would have' (Murphy, 2006: 255, emphasis added). Moreover, the guidelines explicitly confirm that the international organisation is 'the one who listens but says nothing':

Despite these necessary burdens of review and endorsement [by the UNDP staff], national and regional HDRs should contain a standard disclaimer wherein the authors take full responsibility for the contents of the reports and UNDP, its Executive Board and its member states are disassociated from any responsibility (UNDP, 2019: 2.3).

However, the analysis above shows that the HDR team—not the UNDP—is collecting and analysing the data and writing the reports. The UNDP would not be able to play the authoritative role without the presence of local experts on the HDR team. The guidelines explain that the quality of the reports depends 'on the capacity of the core HDR team to interpret local conditions in terms of human development concepts and principles' (UNDP, 2019: 1.3, Box 2)—90% of the consulted HDR members agree with this statement (question 1). Interviewed experts affirm that 'UNDP officers have a tight agenda, the UNDP office collaborates with a lot of different stakeholders in many different projects. (...) The reports would not be possible without an external team' (surveyed HDR team member). Hence, the UNDP plays the authoritative role *with the help of the HDR team*.

2) Who is the speaking subject? If the recorded truth has to come 'from below,' local people *should be* the speaking subject. Indeed, the internal guidelines state that for a

report to be ‘sufficiently participatory,’ the points of view of people with low development standards—namely ‘living in communities who regularly come into contact with the themes and issues analysed in the report’—have to be examined (UNDP, 2019: 2.3). However, the analysis above shows that the content of the reports is not defined by the direct participation of local non-expert people but by the direct participation of the HDR team. Local non-expert people with lower development standards hardly ever participate directly in the elaboration of the reports. Nevertheless, the voice of the members of the HDR team does not come ‘from below’. The recruitment qualifications for the HDR team, as shown in the Terms of Reference designed for their selection, establish that they must have a recognized degree (preferably PhD-level), at least 10 years of experience in academia or research institutions (experience with international organisations is considered to be an asset), and an excellent command of English. Clearly, not the profile of an excluded person with low development standard.

Hence, the HDR team is not the authority, but it enables the authoritative role of the UNDP. It is not the speaking subject, either, but it contributes the local perspective to the reports. Then, how can we explain the ambiguous presence of the HDR team in the participatory institutional architecture?

### **Experts and representation**

The HDR team enables the proper articulation of the top-down and bottom-up power relations within the participatory institutional architecture. The UNDP—that is, the authoritative role—is the primary source of top-down power dynamics within the institutional architecture analysed above. Although the UNDP does not write the reports, it establishes the conditions of possibility for the emergence of truth. It shapes the discursive field where the reports are created and establishes what is ‘sayable and do-able’ (Cornwall, 2002: 8-9). Every social, political or economic issue has to be interpreted and explained ‘through the lens of human development’ (UNDP, 2019: 2.2). For that reason, local experts have to ‘demonstrate commitment to human development principles and values’ (terms of reference), and generally, anyone participating in the process has to show the ‘necessary capacities and sensitivity to apply and promote the human development approach’ (UNDP, 2019: 1.3 Box 3).

In order to legitimate its authoritative role, the UNDP makes instrumental use of ‘local participation’. The UNDP does not promote participatory research methods to empower

excluded people during the elaboration of the national and regional reports. Rather, it promotes participation because ‘the effectiveness of a HDR is reduced *if it is seen* as an internal UNDP document setting out internal positions’ (UNDP, 2019: 1.3 Box 2, emphasis added). Participation is important for the UNDP because it enhances ownership, which increases the impact of the reports. In this sense, the ambiguity of the HDR team’s participation has a pivotal role in the articulation of top-down authority and bottom-up legitimacy. Local experts work at the intersection of two symbolic dimensions: they are both ‘experts’ and ‘local people’. In the local context, they represent the global; in the global realm, they represent the local: ‘In the south we represent the north; in the north we represent the south’ (HDR Team member, first phase of the survey). They enable the role of the authority and, *at the same time*, they represent the voice of local people.

Foucault states that the confession is a hermeneutical process where the ‘obscure truth’ within the speaking subject, which is ‘blind to itself’, emerges and is deciphered (Foucault, 1990: 66-67). This is what the UNDP’s national and regional reports aim to do through ‘highly participative research techniques’. For the UNDP, *the global expertise of the local experts* enables the translation of the distorted preferences of the local (non-expert) people, who ‘may not notice that their freedom of choice has been constrained’ (UNDP, 2016: 92), into sound and allegedly impartial development policy proposals.

## **CONCLUSION: DEVELOPMENT *BY THE EXPERTS*, FOR THE PEOPLE**

The analysis in this article, which is in line with the results of previous research (Telleria 2015, 2017), shows that the UNDP falls into a contradiction. On the one hand, it defends that ‘development must be *by* people, not only *for* them. People must participate fully in the decisions and processes that shape their lives’ (UNDP, 1995: 12, Box 1.1). On the other hand, people do not directly participate in the production of the national and regional HDRs, which are advocacy tools intended to influence political decisions, such as development strategies and budgets (UNDP, 2007: Foreword; 2019: 3.3). In brief, the UNDP defends that people must participate fully in the processes and decisions that shape their lives; however, they do not participate fully in the elaboration of the advocacy tools that influence the decisions that shape their lives. On the contrary,

the UNDP relies on a two-steps formula: *first*, experts – whose research methods give them an authoritative voice – advocate to generate the proper conditions for development; *then*, people – whose judgements may be distorted by their adaptive preferences – actively participate within this context. As explained above, this formula does not fully empower people, since it relies on an institutional participatory architecture based on hierarchical power relations – top-down authority, bottom-up legitimacy. As Lie concludes, the freedom that comes with the turn towards participation, empowerment and ownership may also involve a form of indirect, tacit and subject-making governance (Lie, 2019: 1112-1113). Accordingly, these concepts appear to be ‘undermined by the practices of the very institutions that seek to promote (them)’ (Lie, 2019: 1121).

This contradiction is complex and difficult to overcome due to its deep roots. It is not a methodological contradiction. The UNDP is implementing the research methods that better fit its theoretical framework. The UNDP does not want to co-produce knowledge with excluded people because, *according to the capabilities approach*, their preferences may be distorted. In order to overcome the distortion of adaptive preferences, it relies on the participation of experts and on the use of statistical data and methods to quantify how substantive freedom is constrained (UNDP, 2016: 92). Hence, the contradiction is theoretical. On the one hand, the capabilities approach defends that ‘human beings are both the means and the end of development’ (UNDP, 1990: 14). That is why development must be by and for the people. On the other hand, the capabilities approach relies on the idea that adaptive preferences distort people’s judgements, so their preferences cannot be accepted at face value. That is why development must be, at least in the first instance, by the experts, for the people.

The global, regional and national HDRs champion the capabilities approach, and the capabilities approach rely on the idea that adaptive preferences distort excluded people’s judgements. It is not likely that the UNDP will solve the contradiction above by changing the theoretical basis of its advocacy task flagship. However, the contradiction could be overcome by being explicit and more accurate when speaking about participation. Instead of saying that people must participate *fully* in the decisions that shape their lives and that development must be *by* and for the people, the UNDP could explain that, due to the adaptive preferences issue, experts have to generate the proper conditions first, so people can then participate. That is to say, the UNDP could



plainly explain that, according to their theoretical framework and at least in the first instance, development is *by the experts*, for the people.

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## ANNEX 1

### The “Research Methods, Participation, Ownership and Empowerment in the HDRs of the UNDP” survey: results of phase 2.

These are the seven key ideas and their average ratings (*1 = total disagreement, 10 = total agreement*):

KEY IDEA	AVERAGE RATING
1. The quality of the report relies on the capacity of the HDR team (and the experts consulted) to analyse and interpret the collected data in terms of human development.	9
2. The national and regional HDRs are well known and generally respected because they aim to be neutral and impartial.	8.33
3. The trust in an HDR increases when it relies on empirical, objective data.	8.33
4. The national and regional HDRs empower (increase the capabilities and opportunities of) the people in the mid and long term, when the policies advocated by the HDRs are implemented.	8.33
5. Participation is the most important mechanism to promote local ownership of the HDRs.	9
6. An HDR is successful when it influences public policies and national development strategies towards a human development perspective.	8.67
7. The communication strategy is important to inform people about development issues and to change their attitudes towards the Human Development approach.	8