

Agreement between NIAS and UNDP

Collaboration on policy research on inequality and human development

The National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) India signed an agreement to collaborate in a crucial field: policy research on inequality and human development in a simple event that was held during first week of June. Dr Baldev Raj, Director of NIAS opened the discussion by pointing out that inequality is present in all walks of life. NIAS being a unique institution, seen as a vision by JRD Tata, is poised to make a positive contribution towards eradicating inequality and promoting development through this collaboration, he said. “Inequality has never been challenged”, he added.

Dr Jaco Cilliers, Country Director and Resident Representative, UNDP spoke next about the importance of policy based research focusing on inequality, which will help generate some practical on-the-ground applications for the benefit of society at large. He emphasized the importance of understanding people’s needs and aspirations which then can be clearly represented through public discourse and channelled through proper forums that will help propel policy in the right direction.

“At the core of all this,” he added, “is the importance of the role of a human being in the society.”

He said that he looks upon this collaboration as an exciting opportunity which will help in developing innovative solutions to improve people’s lives. He also said that he hopes that the collaboration will provide a platform for free exchange of ideas and critical reflection.

This was followed by a lecture by Dr AK Shiva Kumar, Director, International Centre for Human Development, New Delhi. Dr Shiva Kumar’s stated important milestones achieved by the Human Development Reports (HDR) right from its inception in 1990. It was a concept which gained both momentum and popularity globally he said. The year 2015 signifies 25 years since the first HDR which introduced a new approach for advancing human well-being. Human development as a concept grew out of debates on economic growth and development worldwide. As opposed to economic growth, the richness of human well-being was emphasized. During this time it was contested that per capita GDP was a poor indicator/measure of over-all human development in any country committed on a path to all round progress. The annual HDRs that followed, subsequently showed, that economic growth does not translate into human development and well-being. The reports have emphasized the need to focus on relevant indicators/factors such as public health, nutrition, education and employment for a sustainable future and not a narrow focus on economic growth.

Citing examples across the years, Dr Shiva Kumar explained how the HDR succeeded in making an impact on development which could not be ignored. He explained how countries, still under the fog, would do better to focus on human development and well-being rather than putting economic growth first. This, he illustrated, by drawing attention to significant contrasting examples, comparing per capita GDP with well-being indicators. Issues of state-

led initiatives, government interventions for public goods and services were much debated, he said, during the development of the human development indices in the early 20th century. In this global debate of human progress, social well-being versus economic growth were the two major contenders pitched against each other. The former was seen as a step towards a progressive society, hence valuable, and the latter as merely an economic profit driven agenda overlooking what were considered actual human rights such as human dignity, right to education and employment, health and nutrition and above all equality. Emphasizing on a practical-oriented framework for development, he pointed out the importance of the richness of the HDRs which culminated into the human development indices that meant so much for nations. The achievements related to the HDRs includes a conglomerative perspective (all-inclusive), a deprivational focus in terms of what is still wanting (for example life expectancy gaps in different countries) and equality perspective.

In the concluding session, Dr Baldev Raj commented on the complexity of inequality in the backdrop of sustainability concepts embedded in people's minds in today's resource intensive world. Prof Narendar Pani (NIAS) also mentioned the relevance of social values in the light of state-centric policies for development which might overlook importance of protecting human rights. An important point raised was about the Nation versus the State and where platforms for dialogues are possible so that freedom of expression is not curbed in any way.

Concluding remarks by Prof Narendar Pani upheld the importance of the collaboration as a step in the right direction towards a fresh assessment of the situation. The transition from rural agricultural employment to urban jobs may increase per capita income but may not contribute to well-being at all if seen from a human development approach he said.

The event took place on 3rd June 2015 at NIAS.