

# Introduction

## What is inequality?

The goal of equality expresses the idea that each person should have comparable freedoms across a range of dimensions. Inequalities are, then, constraints that hinder accomplishment of those freedoms. There is debate about which dimensions of freedom should be prioritized. At the same time, however, there is substantial global common ground that deprivations below a range of achievements constitute unacceptable inequality. This common ground is formulated, most obviously, in the Millennium Development Goals, but also in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and in the constitutions of many nations.

Another way of answering the question “What is inequality?” comes from sociologist Göran Therborn (2006: 4): inequalities are differences we consider unjust. Humans are diverse, and social conditions across the planet vary, but are raised to the level of injustice – an inequality – when they violate a moral norm and when, as Therborn puts it, the inequality is capable of being changed (2009: 20). When 2 percent of adults possess more than half of all global wealth, when one child in seven dies before the age of five in Sub-Saharan Africa, when one in five girl children is allowed to die young, or is selectively aborted, as happens in China, many consider that unjust.

Theories of ethics and justice, from the Left and the Right of the political spectrum, demand equality in one dimension or another in order to speak plausibly to all (Sen 1992). Even theories that argue against equality are concerned with some dimension of inequality.

Not only do income-egalitarians ... demand equal incomes, and welfare-egalitarians ask for equal welfare levels, but also ... pure libertarians demand equality with respect to an entire class of rights and liberties. They are all “egalitarians” in some essential way ... (Sen 1992: ix)

So, economist and philosopher Amartya Sen argues that ethical and political theories debate not egalitarianism versus freedom, but what dimension of equality should be sought.

This atlas broadens the debate from a narrow definition of inequality that focuses on inequality of income because we suspect that specific dimensions of inequality have causes and possible mitigations related to that dimension. Nonetheless, there are some general processes behind a range of inequalities.

## What causes inequality?

While inequalities are often palpable daily experiences for the injured individual, the causes may be multiple and complex. Therborn (2006, 2009) has, nonetheless, suggested a useful fourfold summary of key causes of inequality (which we simplify):

*Exploitation* – the extraction of value by a superior group from an inferior group, for example, employers using low-paid labor;

*Exclusion* – discrimination by one group excluding another, for example, racism;

*Distantiation* – economic mechanisms, such as the bonus

culture, that result in a widening distance between low-ranking employees and executives, countries that are not industrializing and those that are;

*Hierarchy* – advantages within formal organizations, such as rank within an administration, corporation, or army.

These causes of inequality arise both from an individual's initial endowments, of skill and fortune, and from their location in systems of opportunities structured by nation, class, gender, and race. They operate through institutions, such as a corporation or a family, through practices of interaction, including labor hiring, housing allocation, and the borrowing and lending of money, and through the language we use to explain, think about and enact our daily lives. They are, in other words, dispersed throughout all elements of human existence, and they may influence action at all levels, from face-to-face contact to national and international dealings.

One pattern evident from the map of the Human Development Index, and throughout the pages of this atlas, is the difference between those who live in the industrialized “North” of the globe, and those who live in the non-industrialized “South”. With few exceptions, birth in a non-industrialized (developing) nation predisposes two-thirds of the world's population to disadvantage in almost all dimensions of inequality. This happens because the growth of industrial productivity transforms many aspects of society, and the life possibilities of most, if not all, in that nation.

We can identify this process as the *distantiation* of the North from the South, involving also elements of *exploitation* and *exclusion* during and since colonial rule. The evidence from historical studies of income and economic production (see pages 16–17) suggests that increasing productivity as the North industrialized was the main force driving this distantiation. There is an irony or paradox that North–South distantiation continues in the 21st century, even as travel and communication times are reduced by technological innovation.

## Analytical approach

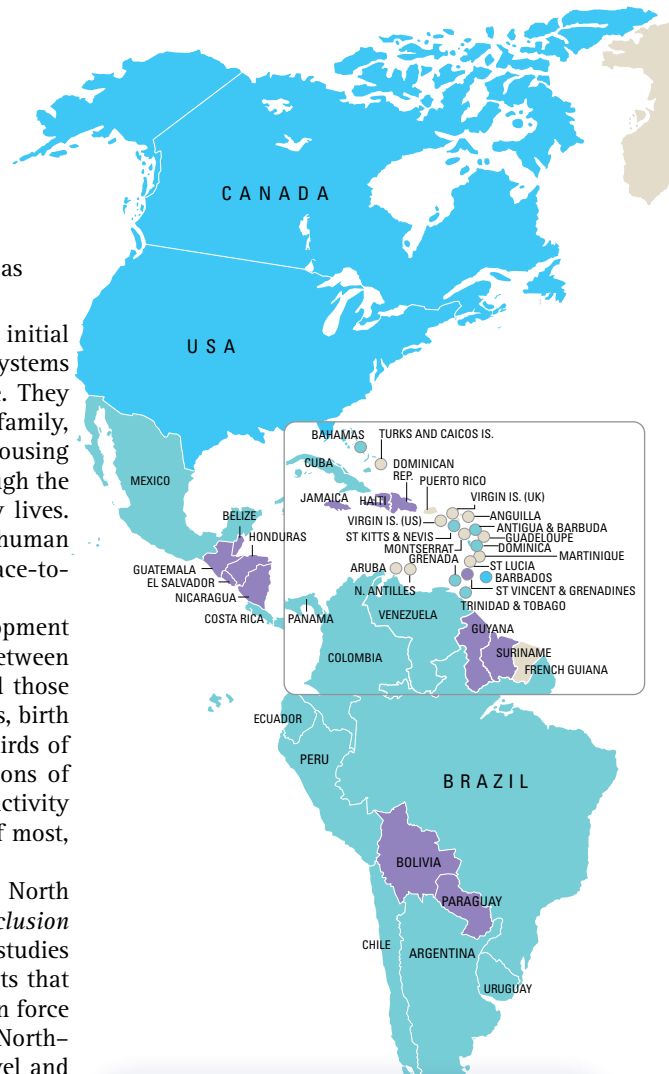
The analytical approach that informs this atlas is that of Amartya Sen. In his work on inequality, famine and poverty (1981, 1992, 1999), Sen distinguished some useful analytical categories:

*Entitlements and capabilities* – social and individual relations giving command over a desired functioning, for example, employment of laborers, which entitles them to a wage with which to buy food;

*Functionings* – desired individual outcomes such as a long life or being nourished;

*Freedoms* – a broad set, including political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security.

Functionings and freedoms are things that people want to do and to be. In other words, Sen describes inequalities in relation to desirable achievements, the lives that people value. Then, his analysis identifies the specific entitlements and capabilities that enable a particular

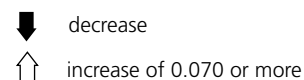


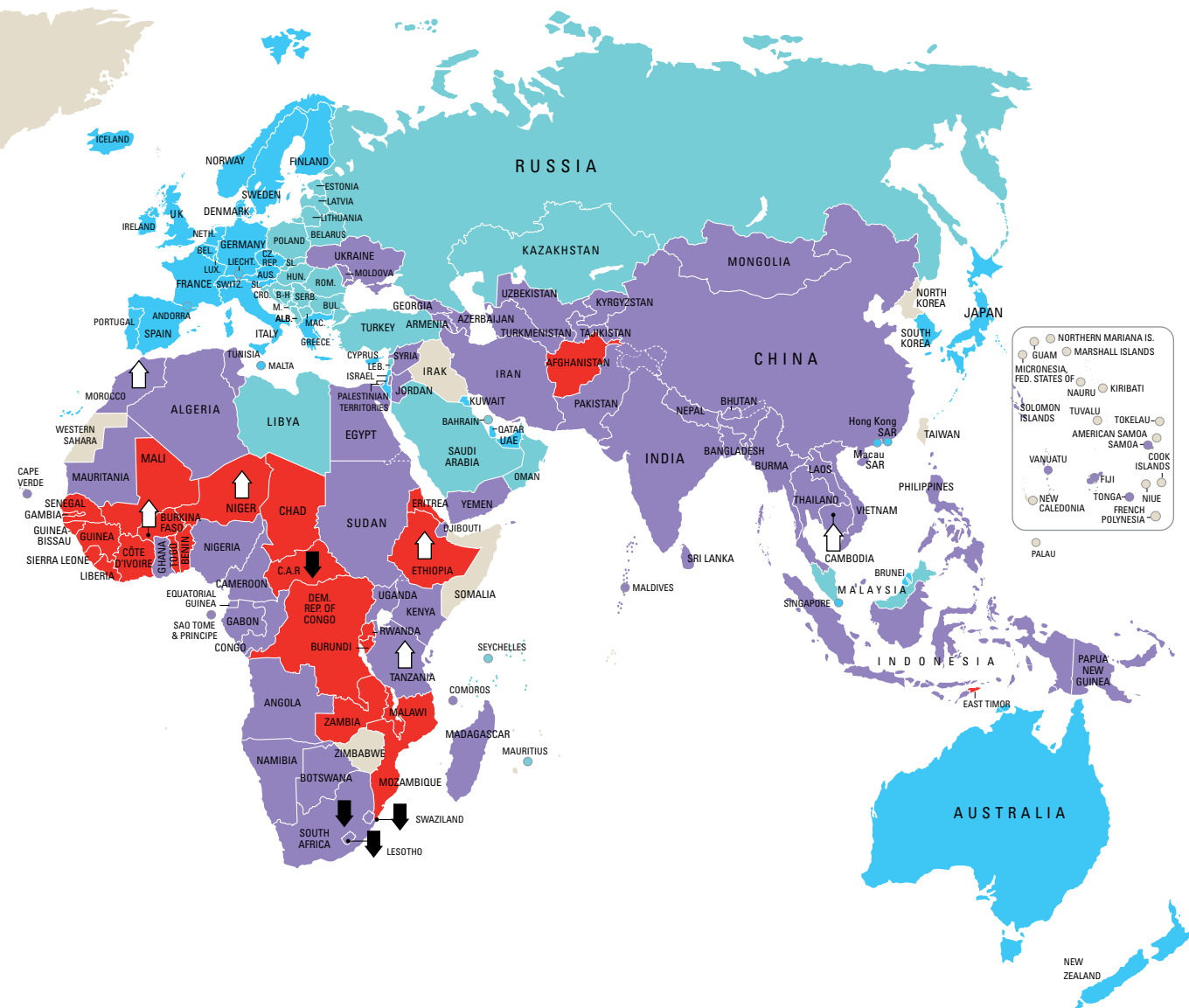
## ▲ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX 2007

The Human Development Index combines three elements: longevity measured by life expectancy at birth, income measured by GDP per capita, and knowledge measured by adult literacy rate, school, and university enrollment.



Change in HDI score  
2000–07





outcome. Most strikingly, this approach has been applied to reconceptualize social advance or development:

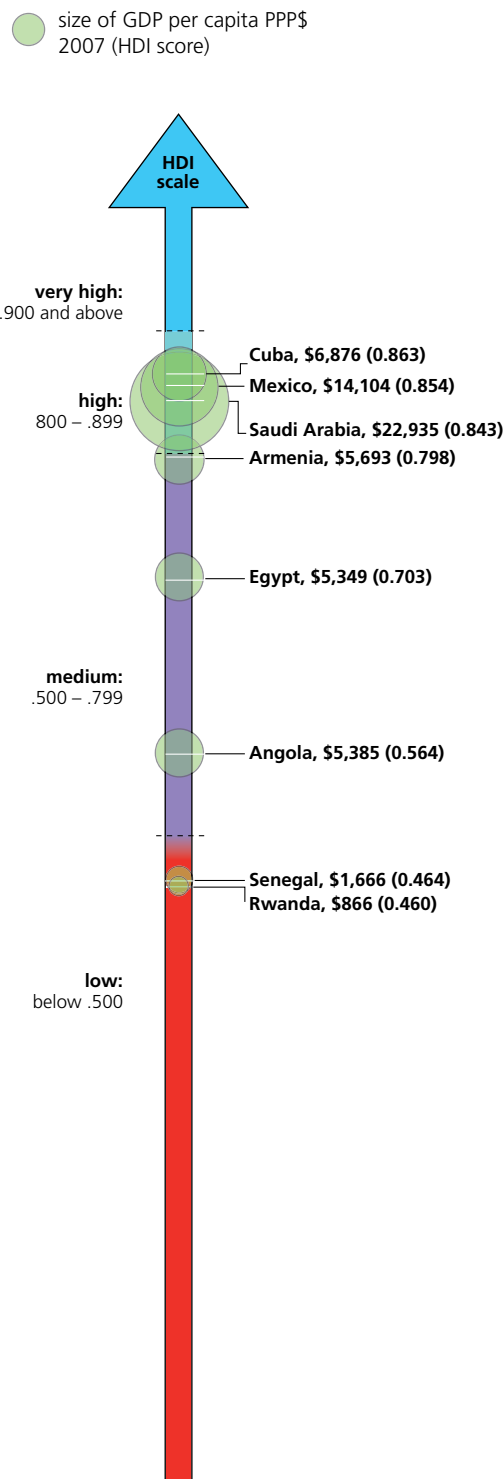
Expansion of freedom is viewed, in this approach, both as the primary end and as the principal means of development. Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency. (Sen 1999; xii)

These ideas have helped make a significant opening for human advancement, and helped foster an analysis that rescued the tragedy of famine from scholarly and governmental indifference. The ideas of entitlements and capabilities helped disaggregate social relationships, providing new language for interdisciplinary understanding of, and action on, this most desperate of human crises. Recognition of the importance of achieved functionings, notably life expectancy, provided new ways of thinking about progress. This spurred wide global debate, notably among government agencies, and led to new measures of social progress. The idea of plural freedoms, criticism

## ▼ COMPARISON OF INCOME AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

GDP per capita PPP\$

HDI score for selected countries



notwithstanding (Agarwal, Humphries and Robeyns 2005: 8-9), has helped revitalize the study of social change, and facilitated analysis and action to recognize and mitigate multidimensional inequality.

There is, as Therborn notes, a need to make this analytical approach more accessible and useful for empirical research. Ideas of entitlement, capability, functionings and freedoms are not easily understood or measured. They provide a way of disaggregating human achievements, the lives we want, and the complex social and physical processes that produce them.

In this atlas, the analytical approach helps to illuminate the multiple dimensions of inequality, and an exploration of current understanding of the social dynamics of each. To make sense of the many dimensions of inequality, the atlas is structured around a set of categories based on terms in common usage.

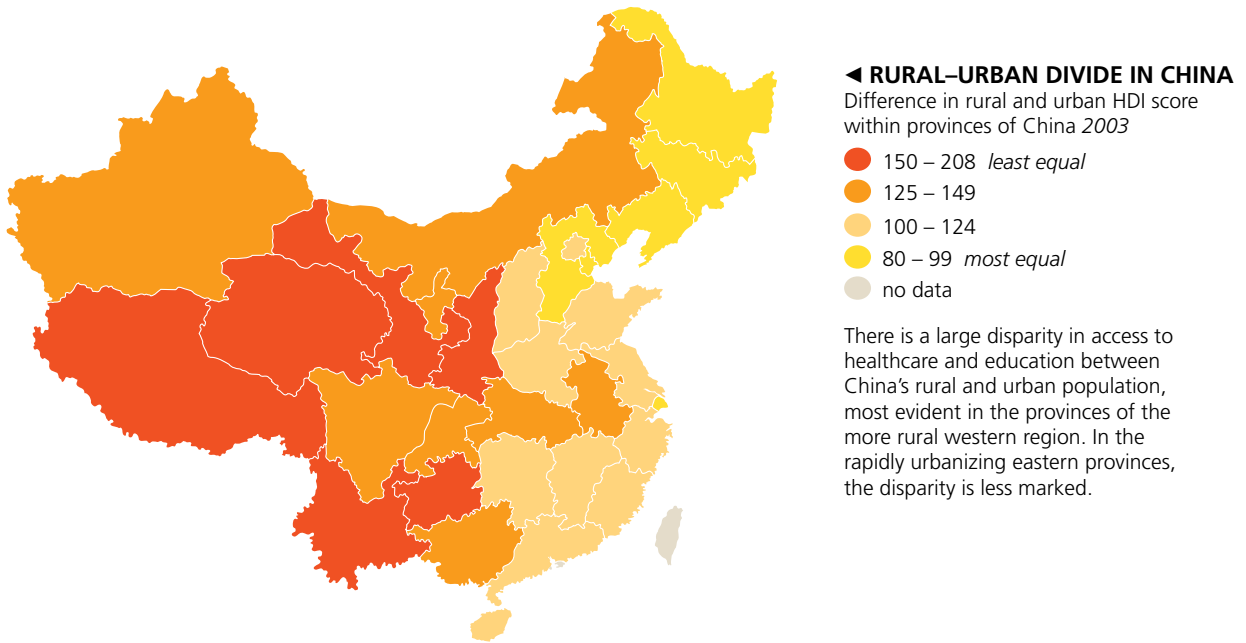
### Human Development Index

In 1990, the UN Development Program, one of the UN's less influential agencies, engaged one of the most powerful (the World Bank) in a discussion about how to represent human achievement. At stake was whether progress should be measured by the proliferation of goods, or by the length and quality of people's lives. The UNDP, drawing partly on ideas from Amartya Sen, proposed measuring human achievement with the Human Development Index, an aggregate measure combining life expectancy, literacy and an improved indicator of productivity (GDP per capita at Purchasing Power Parity – see page 118 for definition). No single indicator is adequate to represent the multiple dimensions of global inequality, but the HDI has opened up discussion of social priorities. The HDI reveals the importance of action, usually governmental or collective, through programs that redistribute, include, and protect the interests of the disadvantaged.

The diagram (right) demonstrates that there is not necessarily a direct correlation between national income and human development. Saudi Arabia, for example, is famously rich from oil royalties, but achieves less for its citizens in terms of life expectancy and literacy than does Cuba, with one-third the GDP per capita. Countries with similar national incomes per capita, such as Armenia, Egypt, and Angola, have HDI scores that are very different. This reinforces the point that government action for the disadvantaged matters.

On the whole, however, industrialized areas of North America and Europe tend to have a high HDI, while non-industrialized, developing, areas of Africa and South America have lower HDI, as is evident from the map on pages 10–11. Social action in countries with low levels of income can raise their HDI scores to match the scores of countries with higher income primarily by reducing inequality and increasing the efficacy of spending on health and education.

Although most countries' HDI score has been increasing, inequalities between rural and urban areas persist, especially in those countries, such as China, where the national economy is booming. The rural population in every province of China experiences worse living conditions, on average, than those registered as urban (which



does not include rural migrants working in towns and cities). The greatest discrepancy between rural and urban is found in the predominantly rural provinces.

Critics of the HDI question the reliance on only three dimensions of human development to indicate human capabilities and well-being. They also assert that failure to include ecological and gender considerations renders HDI an inadequate measure of human development. It is clear, nonetheless, that the discussion begun in 1990 by publication of the first *Human Development Report*, has created space for a broader conception of human goals than was prevalent at that time.

### Problems with the national view

The genre of the global statistical atlas, of which this is an example, rests on the growth of international agencies, with first the League of Nations and then the United Nations, and their need to publish compilations of national statistics that illustrate the scale of the issues they address.

There are risks in the use of these statistics. Constant repetition of global maps can reinforce the simple idea that nations are the appropriate and exclusive unit for analyzing inequalities and social change. We have sought to mitigate this risk through the use of graphs, maps, and charts that illustrate differences along lines of gender, class or ethnicity, and through the occasional use of spatial distributions within one country.

We leave the reader to remember the differences within her or his own nation, to be unsatisfied by national averages, and to question ideas that nations rather than people organize social change.

Ben Crow  
 Suresh Lodha  
 Santa Cruz, August 2010

## ► UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION

Percentage share of  
total income and wealth  
among the world population  
2002 & 2000

- quintile 10 *richest*
- quintile 9
- quintile 8
- quintile 7
- quintile 6
- quintile 5
- quintile 4
- quintile 3
- quintile 2
- quintile 1 *poorest*

