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# Footprints of a Winning Idea: Three Decades of the Human Development Paradigm (1990–2019)

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## Abstract

The rise and fall of international development paradigms has long captured the interest of scholars, but interpreting whether a paradigm is winning or losing depends largely on how we measure its success. In this research note, we contribute to this debate by assessing the influence of development paradigms via comparative bibliometric analysis. Focusing on the human development and capabilities approach (HDCA) promoted by the Human Development Reports (HDRs) of the United Nations, our analysis reveals how the HDCA has emerged to become an influential paradigm of development over the last three decades. As the HDCA has fared impressively well vis-a-vis numerous alternative development paradigms and approaches including Marxism, modernisation theory, dependency theory, "pro-poor growth" and "aid effectiveness," we conclude that despite being relatively new, the HDCA has become one of the most influential approaches to development in the world today.

## Keywords

Human development, Ideas, Paradigms, Capabilities approach, Bibliometric

The “history of development” has been marked by overlapping arrivals and departures of development ideas which become influential for a while before eventually getting sidelined by new ways of thinking about, framing, and conceiving “development” (Rist 2008; Pieterse 2010). Since development ideas are always in flux and competing against each other there is no guarantee that any newcomer will succeed or remain in a position of influence in the intellectual marketplace (e.g. Alkire and Ritchie 2007; McNeill 2007). Thus, observers may wonder how well the “human development and capabilities approach” (HDCA), an international development paradigm promoted by the United Nations (UN) via annual Human Development Reports (HDRs) since the end of the Cold War has been faring in the competition among development ideas (e.g. Fukuda-Parr and Shiva Kumar 2003; Jolly et al. 2004; Murphy 2006; McNeill 2007; Joshi and O’Dell 2015; Thérien 2015; Hirai 2017; Joshi 2020). In response to this question, this research note applies bibliometric

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analysis to assess whether the HDRs as well as important ideas they have promoted have been able to sustain significant attention both over time and vis-à-vis competing development ideas and paradigms.

As the thirtieth anniversary of the HDRs has just passed, we believe it is timely to evaluate the HDCA's relative standing in public discourse. Setting the stage for this inquiry, Escobar's (1995) incisive critique of mainstream development crucially re-positioned "development" as fundamentally a *discourse* as opposed to something that exists independent of our consciousness. Moreover, among development discourses, numerous scholars have pointed out how the HDCA differs from the neo-liberal capitalist paradigm of development as the HDCA places primary emphasis on individual capabilities and human freedom as the ultimate ends of development (s.g. Sen 1999; Jolly 2003; Robeyns 2005; Alkire 2005; Deneulin and Shahani 2009; Nussbaum 2011). This point is clearly laid out in the inaugural 1990 Human Development Report.

The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. This may appear to be a simple truth. But it is often forgotten in the immediate concern with the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth. (UNDP 1990, 9)

Similarly, the opening lines of Amartya Sen's book titled *Development as Freedom* state that:

Development can be seen, it is argued here, as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Focusing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance, or with social modernization. (Sen 1999, 3)

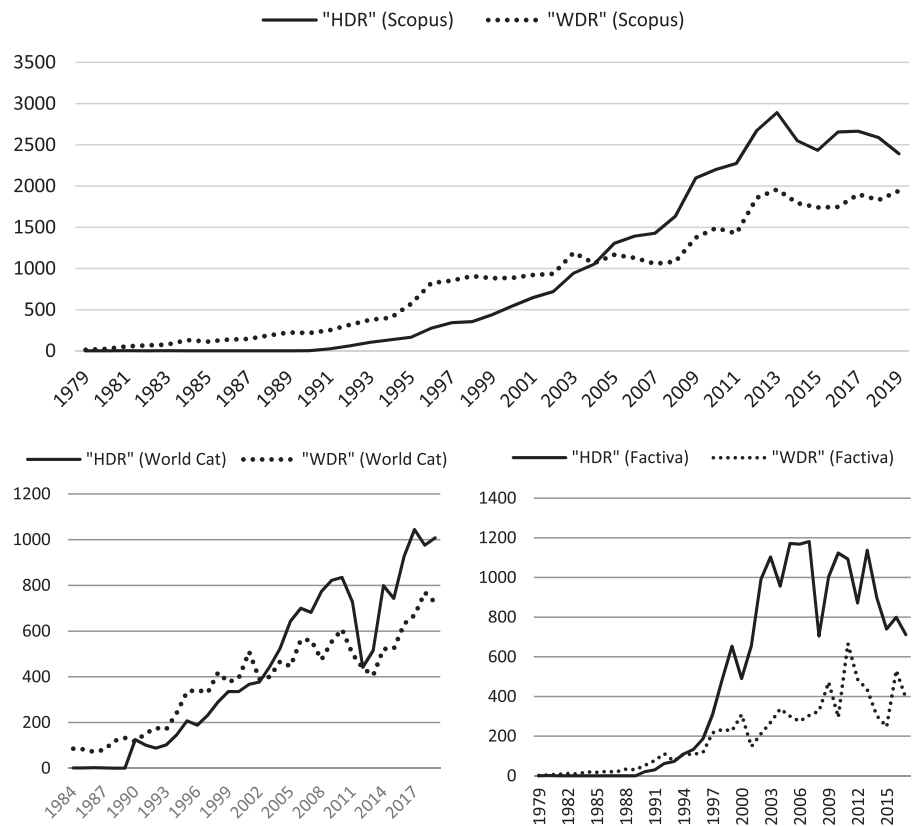
Thus, by focusing on "development as freedom," the HDCA offers a significant challenge to competing development paradigms which prioritise growth in production over personal well-being.

Assessing the effects of this challenge, this research note quantitatively examines how much has been written about ideas and concepts associated with the human development paradigm in popular and academic writings over the past four decades via comparative bibliometric analysis. It measures the relative success of the HDCA paradigm by asking two questions. First, has there been an increasing and sustained presence of written texts about human development in scholarly and general public literature? Second, has human development received greater attention than competing development paradigms and concepts? These questions are then addressed by measuring the number of publications written about competing development approaches appearing in (a) book publications of all types, (b) scholarly academic work and (c) global newspapers. To conduct this analysis data was collected from the most comprehensive bibliometric sources available for these three genres: World Catalogue

(WorldCat) 1979–2019 for books, Scopus Abstract and Citation database (Scopus) 1979–2019 for academic scholarship, and the Factiva Global News Monitoring database (Factiva) 1979–2017 for global newspapers.<sup>1</sup>

As scholars have noted, at the epicentre of disseminating and promoting human development ideas has been the UN’s annual flagship report on development, the Human Development Report (HDR) first issued in 1990 (Joshi and O’Dell 2017). While the thematic specialisation of HDRs vary from year to year, these reports have continued to deliver messages consistent with the HDCA. Thus, counting the number of publications referencing the HDRs over time can serve as a useful proxy for ascertaining their public influence. To understand their relative influence, we also examined the bibliometric trajectory of the HDRs’ rival, the World Development Report (WDR) issued annually by the World Bank.

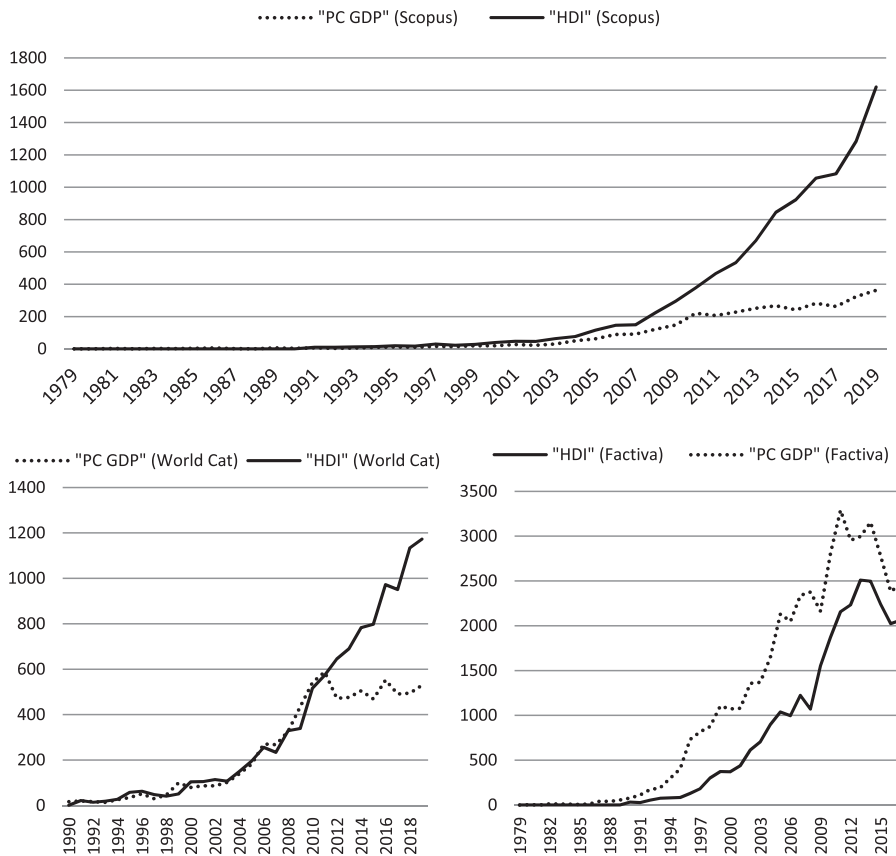
As Figure 1 demonstrates, in academic publications the WDRs received more attention than the HDRs during the 1990s. However, since the early



**Figure 1.** Bibliometric Results by Year for Development Reports. Data Sources: Keyword searches by the authors on “human development report” and “world development report” (in quotes) by source year via Scopus, World Cat, and Factiva. Search results updated in January 2021.

2000s there have been more publications referencing the HDRs as captured by searches in Scopus, and World Cat (WC). A similar transition occurred in mass media news reporting (as captured by Factiva) whereby HDRs surpassed WDRs in newspaper coverage even earlier back in the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup>

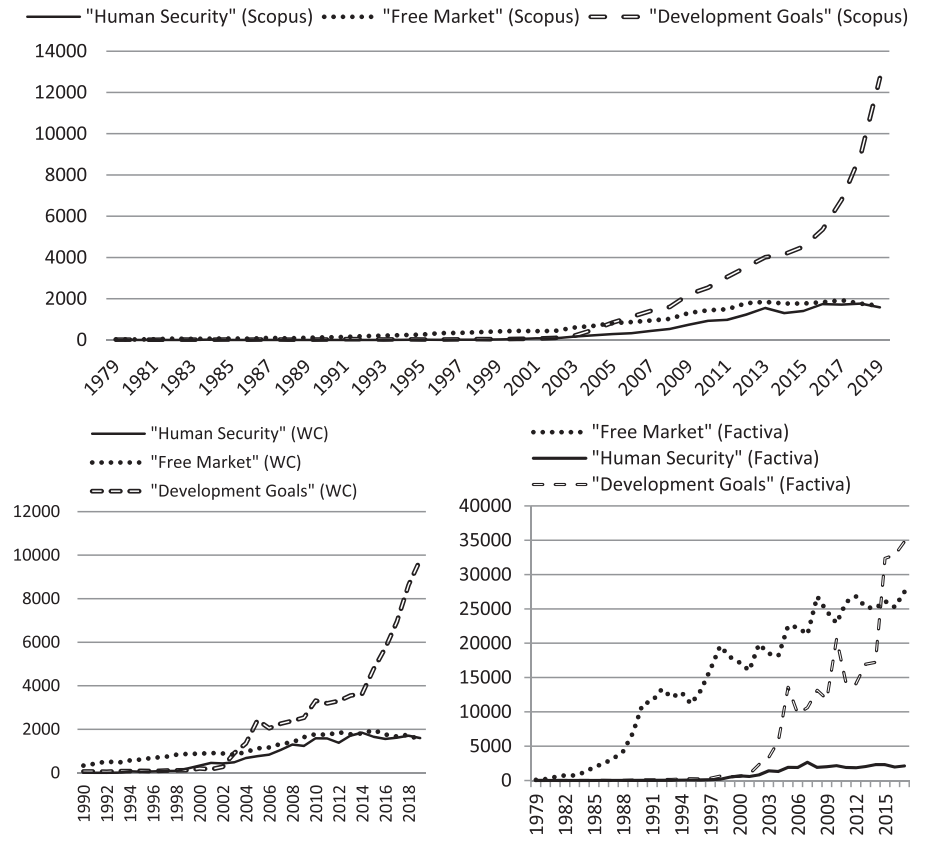
Aside from the HDRs, another prominent contribution of the HDCA has been to rethink and challenge which indicators should be used to measure development progress. The signature indicator of the UN's human development paradigm has been the "human development index" (HDI) which was designed with the specific intent of challenging "gross domestic product" (GDP) or "per capita GDP" as the primary measure of a nation's progress (Haq 1995; Fukuda-Parr and Shiva Kumar 2003). As shown in Figure 2, whereas the HDI did not exist back in the 1980s, it has risen dramatically in popularity and overtook "per capita GDP" in academic scholarship (Scopus) and book publications (World Cat) by the late 2000s. Meanwhile, the HDI has reached 4/5ths of the usage of per capita GDP in mass media coverage



**Figure 2.** Bibliometric Results by Year for Development Indicators. Data Sources: Keyword searches by the author on "human development index" and "per capita GDP" (in quotes) by source year via Scopus, World Cat, and Factiva. Search results updated in January 2021.

(as captured by Factiva). Thus, the composite HDI measure (which includes health, education, and income as components) has rapidly travelled from obscurity to mainstream over the past three decades.

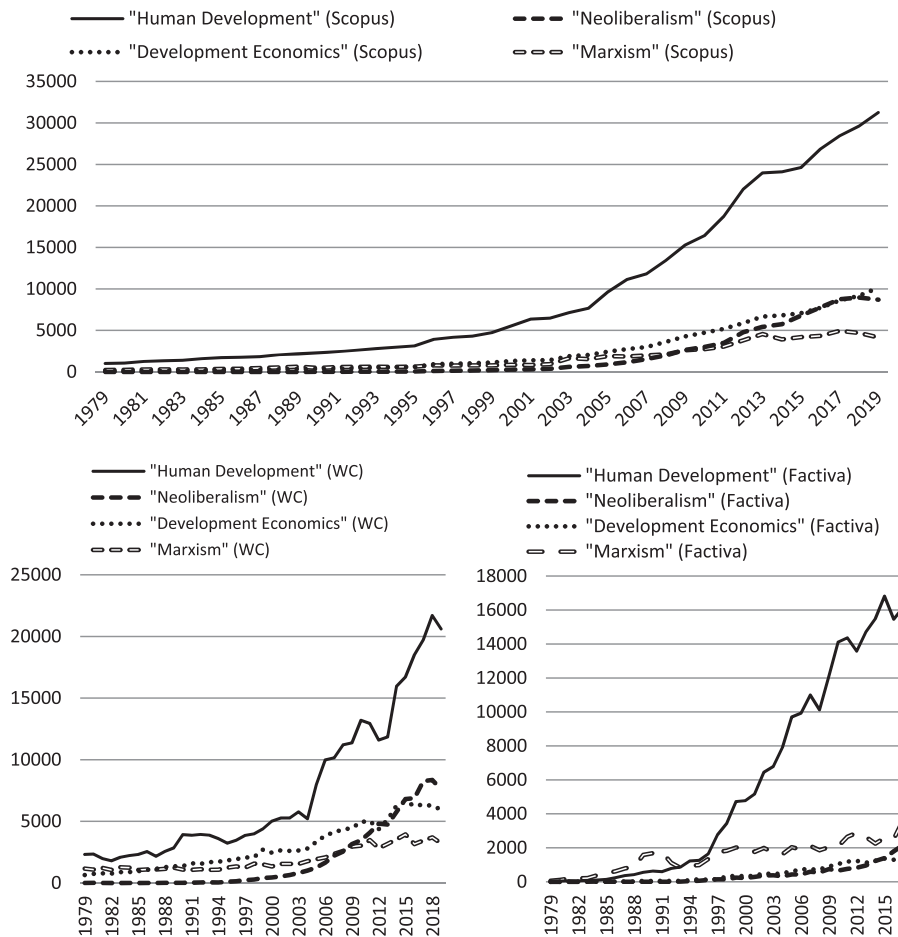
Another major component of the UN’s approach to human development has been its promotion of large-scale global “development goals” like the 2000–2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the 2015–2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN has also linked human development to international security via the “human security” concept which it first launched in the 1994 HDR (UNDP 1994; Thérien 2012). To see whether these innovations have succeeded in public discourse, we counted how many publications on “development goals” and “human security” have appeared vis-à-vis those addressing the “free market,” a prominent rival paradigm to the HDCA (see Jolly 2003). As Figure 3 reveals, since the early 2000s, publications on “development goals” have overtaken the “free market” in books (World Cat), academic publications (Scopus) and in global newspaper reporting (Factiva). By contrast,



**Figure 3.** Bibliometric Results by Year for “Free Market”, “Human Security” and “Development Goals.” Data Sources: Keyword searches by the author on “free market,” “human security,” and “development goals” (in quotes) by source year via Scopus, World Cat, and Factiva. Search results updated in January 2021.

the concept of “human security” has appeared less often in the mass media, but it has gained attention and is now on par with the “free market” in academic scholarship (Scopus) and in general book publications (World Cat). Thus, it is quite evident that especially since the turn of the millennium, the HDRs, HDI, and “development goals” have all fared impressively well vis-à-vis the WDRs, “per capita GDP,” and the “free market” in publications which shape general public and academic discourse.

We also examined whether the HDCA has made inroads as a broader paradigm of development compared to Marxism, neoliberalism, development economics, modernisation theory, dependency theory, and the developmental state as six major development approaches identified by Desai (2009). As Figure 4 below demonstrates, “human development” has in fact gained a much stronger

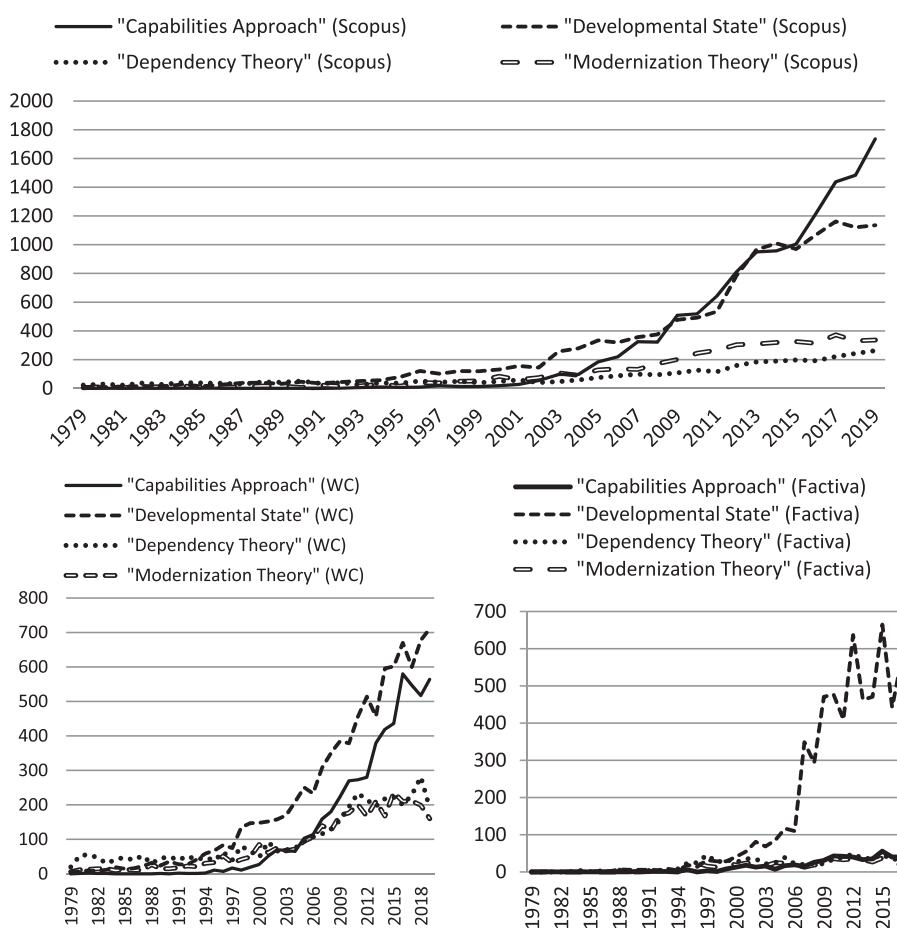


**Figure 4.** Bibliometric Results by Year for Macro-Level Development Paradigms. Data Sources: Keyword searches by the author on “human development,” “neoliberalism,” “development economics” and “Marxism” (in quotes) by source year via Scopus, World Cat, and Factiva. Search results updated in January 2021.

presence in academic publications and newspaper coverage compared to neo-liberalism, Marxism, and development economics.

As for other prominent development paradigms, we found the “capabilities approach” which first emerged in the 1990s to appear in more scholarly publications nowadays than either “modernization theory” (originating in the 1950s and 1960s) or “dependency theory” (which became prominent in the 1970s). In fact, only the “developmental state” (popularised in the 1980s) outnumbered the “capabilities approach” in general public and mass media publications. However, this was not the case for academic scholarship (as measured by Scopus) where the “capabilities approach” had become even more prominent by the mid-2010s as shown in Figure 5.<sup>3</sup>

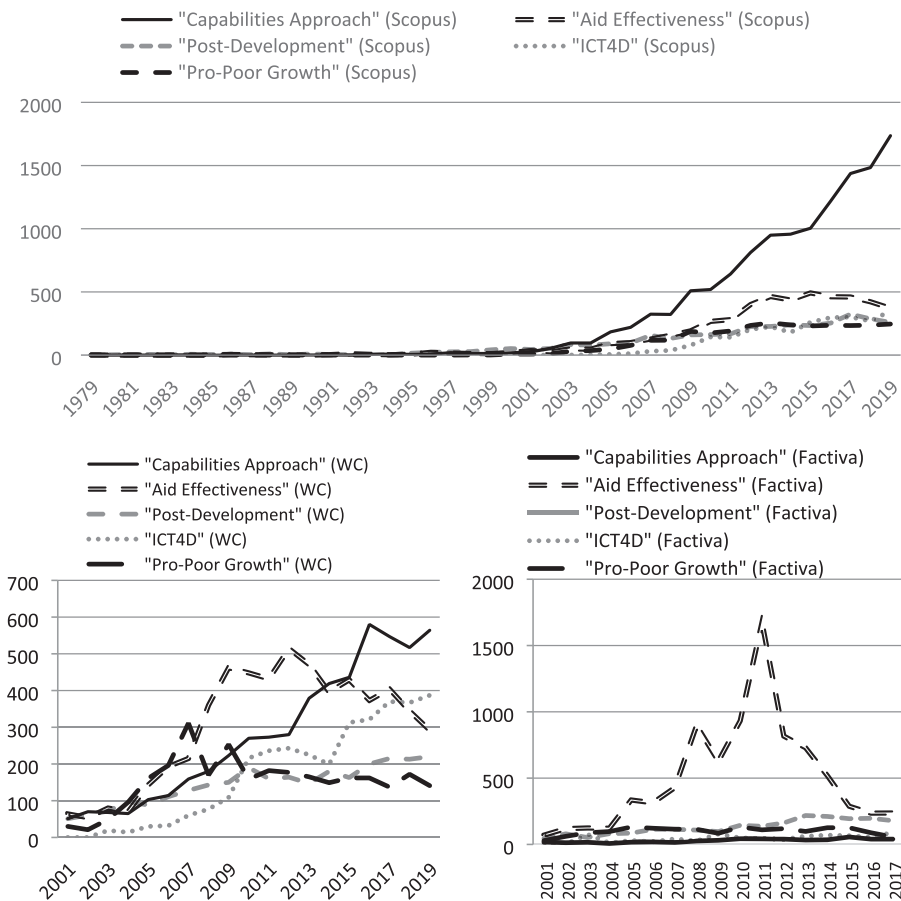
As these results illustrate, compared to long-standing paradigms of development, the capabilities approach has emerged as a serious contender in academic



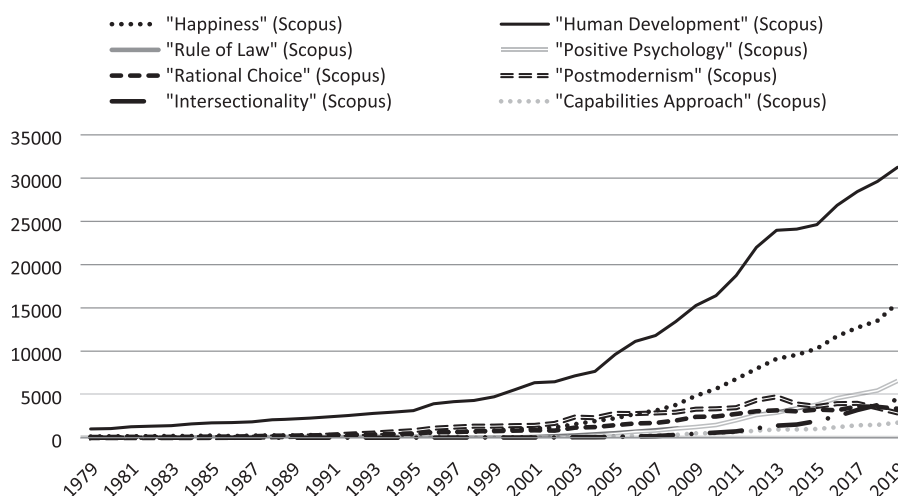
**Figure 5.** Bibliometric Results by Year for Influential Development Frameworks. Data Sources: Keyword searches by the author on “capabilities approach,” “developmental state,” “dependency theory,” and “modernization theory” (in quotes) by source year via Scopus, World Cat, and Factiva. Search results updated in January 2021.



scholarship over a relatively short period of time already eclipsing two widely influential development paradigms associated with (or promoted by) the Global North (modernisation theory) and Global South (dependency theory). This may in part be due to these older paradigms naturally fading away with the passage of time while newer paradigms are more prone to capture public attention. But three decades ago, the rise of the capabilities approach vis-à-vis competing conceptualizations of development was by no means a foregone conclusion. Comparing new approaches to development that have emerged over the past three decades, “post-development” (see Escobar 1995; Pieterse 2010) was actually in the lead by the late 1990s. By the early 2000s, “pro-poor growth” then took the lead only to be followed by “aid effectiveness” in the late 2000s and early 2010s. In fact, when we look at World Cat it was only after 2015 that the “capabilities approach” came into the lead as shown



**Figure 6.** Bibliometric Results by Year for Post-Cold War Development Approaches. Data Sources: Keyword searches by the author on “capabilities approach,” “aid effectiveness,” “post-development,” “ICT4D,” and “pro-poor growth” (in quotes) by source year via Scopus, World Cat, and Factiva. Search results updated in January 2021.



**Figure 7.** Bibliometric Results by Year for Contemporary Frameworks for Understanding Human Societies. Data Source: Keyword searches by the author on “capabilities approach,” “intersectionality,” “postmodernism,” “rational choice,” “positive psychology,” “rule of law,” “happiness,” and “human development” (in quotes) by source year in Scopus. Search results updated in January 2021.

in Figure 6. During this time, “aid effectiveness” actually featured more strongly in the mass media (Factiva), but in academic discourse (Scopus), the capabilities approach clearly surpassed aid effectiveness as well as “post-development,” “pro-poor growth” and “ICT4D” (information and communication technologies for development).

Lastly, comparing overarching paradigms for understanding societies, the “capabilities approach” may seem like a minor player, but the concept of “human development” has not only been prominent but has even surpassed “happiness” as a major focal point in recent years. In academic writings, the concept of human development has also outpaced many alternative interpretive frameworks promoted in the human sciences over the last three decades including “positive psychology,” “rational choice,” “postmodernism,” “intersectionality,” and the “rule of law” (see Figure 7).

To conclude, in this brief research note we assessed the thirty year trajectory of the human development paradigm which has been promoted by the UN since the end of the Cold War. Although the influence of a development approach can be difficult to measure, the frequency of books, journal articles, and newspaper reports published on given development topics and approaches can give us a practical sense of which development ideas and concepts are more salient than others at a given point in time. Correspondingly, our comparative bibliometric analysis offers considerable evidence in support of the assertion that the human development paradigm has indeed been very successful in capturing global attention through its increasing prominence in published writings vis-à-vis other development paradigms. While we do not yet know whether this

will continue to be the case over the coming decades, the timeliness and relevance of human development has arguably grown even greater now that the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated both the fragility and importance of human development in our world.

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## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Notes

1. Bibliometric data was first collected in March 2018 and subsequently updated in June 2020 and January 2021. For more details on the academic coverage of the Scopus abstract and citation database see Elsevier (2020). Additional analysis of academic scholarship was conducted on the popular Google Scholar search engine but is not shown here due to concerns about over-reporting and duplicated results on that platform. Though larger in magnitude, Google Scholar results were also rather similar to that for Scopus.
2. Figure 1 also reveals that declines in mass media coverage of the HDRs (captured by Factiva) occurred in 2007 and 2012, years when no global HDR was published by the UN.
3. On the “developmental state,” we also observed that certain publications emanated from the fields of biology and ecology and were not germane to international development.

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