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POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

## **Research Paper Title:**

Social Responsibility versus Sustainable  
Development in United Nations Policy Documents:  
A Meta-Analytical Review of Key Terms in Human  
Development Reports

“WORLD SYMPOSIUM ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND  
SUSTAINABILITY”, Edinburgh, UK, 27-29 June 2018

# Acknowledgments

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# Introductory [framing] Quotes

- “When the last tree is cut down, the last fish eaten, and the last stream poisoned, you will realize that you cannot eat money —Native American saying.” (In: *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, Simpson and Speake 2009)
- **“A transition to sustainability cannot be achieved if our economic system is not radically changed, simply because limitless economic growth is impossible within a limited planet.” (Pacheco et al. 2018, p. 238, cf. Ripple et al. 2017)**

# Research Rationale & Study Motivation

- **Better understand United Nations (UN) policy discourse at meta-analytical level. Study investigates what prioritisation the UN ascribes to so-called ‘economic’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘social’ development in its global flagship Human Development Reports (HDRs), published (almost) annually since 1990.**
- Meta-analytical study of all 25 UN HDRs published to date offers fresh policy perspectives on the role and place of different development foci in “the most influential [literature] in the field of development” (Telleria 2017, p. 2143, attributed to McNeill 2007).
- The study offers auspicious benefits of macro-analysis that may promote a more holistic agenda for ‘human development’, including in areas of social responsibility and sustainable development.

# Sustainable Development (SD) in the Literature:

Non-exhaustive overview of selected SD models and conceptual approaches.

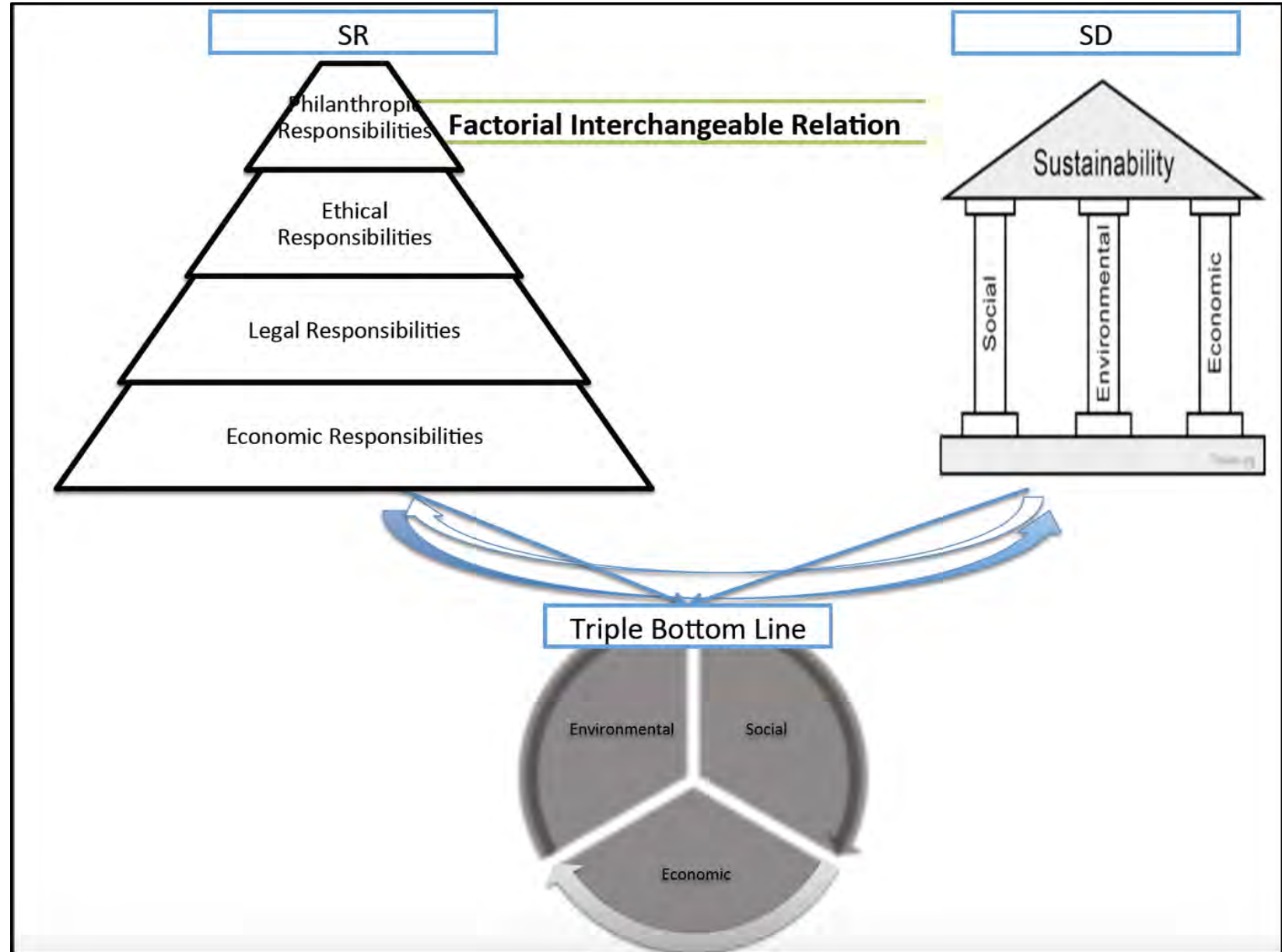
Author	Definition	Dimensions & Orientation
<i>Brundtland Report</i> (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED] 1987, pp. 16, 41)	"1. Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."	Generic
MacMillan (1988)	It is the kind of economically-driven development that continues based on its exploitation of environmental resources jeopardizing the environment	Economic > Environmental
Pearce (1988)	SD translates to per capita utility that increases over time	Economic > Economic
Braat (1991)	SD combines two notions: economic development & ecological sustainability, both leading to maximising welfare, which can be ecologically sustained	Economic-Environmental > Social
Holmberg (Ed., 1992)	SD is a result of interaction between trade-offs between biological, economic and social systems	Complex (involving the three pillars interactively)
O'Riordan and Yeager (1994)	Managing economic growth within the bounds of natural replenishable systems	Economic > Environmental
Winograd (1995)	SD is about satisfying human needs without compromising the environment	Socio-Economic > Environmental
Choucri (1997)	Managing social demands without eroding life properties or social cohesion	Social > Environmental-Social

# Social Responsibility (SR) in the Literature:

Non-exhaustive overview of selected SR/CSR models and conceptual approaches.

Author	Definition	Dimensions
M. Friedman (1962, 1970, 2007)	The sole social responsibility of businesses is the use of resources to increase profit as long as they engage with honesty and fairness	Organisational, Societal
Carroll (1979)	Interaction between different categories of social responsibilities	Economic, Legal, Ethical, Discretionary
Wartick and Cochran (1985)	"The underlying interaction among the principles of social responsibility, the process of social responsiveness and the policies developed to address social issues" (p. 758)	Economic, Legal, Ethical, Discretionary
Wood (1991)	"A Business organization's configuration of principles of social responsibility, processes of social responsiveness, and policies, programs, and observable outcomes as they relate to the firm's societal relationship" (p. 693)	Institutional, Organisational, Individual
Dahlsrud (2008)	"CSR is viewed as a social construction and [...] it is not possible to develop an unbiased definition" (p. 2). However, existing definitions of CSR can be categorised into five primary dimensions (p. 4)	Environmental, Social, Economic, Stakeholders, Voluntariness
International Organization for Standardization (ISO 2010)	Social responsibility comprises seven core subjects (p. 9)	Organisational governance, human rights, labour practices, the environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues, community involvement and development

**We propose TBL as a bridging notion that conjoins elements of SD and SR, linking the environment, social and economic components.**



# Research Methodology — **Design**

- Methodological approaches **based on past similar systematic keyword research** within UN literature: (1) comparative analyses of concepts ‘sustainable development’ and ‘environmental sustainability’ (Walid and Luetz 2018); and (2) critical analyses of conceptual presentation of ‘the poor’ as either ‘active’ OR ‘passive’ stakeholders in development (Luetz et al. 2018, IN PRESS)
- Research combines **quantitative and qualitative components** that are distinct and yet complementary. This **mixed methods approach** (Punch 2014, pp. 301-326) uses an ‘**exploratory design**’ paradigm that seems appropriately suited to simultaneously encapsulate exploratory breadth and analytical depth (Creswell 2014; Creswell and Plano Clark 2011).



# Research Methodology — **Sampling**

- HDRs published annually by the **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**. (cf. UNDP 1990 > UNDP 2016). HDRs considered to be **important international milestone reports for global development**: “the most influential [literature] in the field of development in recent decades” (Telleria 2017, p. 2143, attributed to McNeill 2007).
- Reports are comprehensive and range in length **from 130 pages** (UNDP 1991) **to 440 pages** (UNDP 2006), with **236 pages as the average** report size. With a total of **25 HDRs published to date**, the total sample size of all reports combined comprises a cumulative **5,896 pages overall**. For the purposes of this research study, this body of work represented a suitable data set. **Comprehensive sampling** ensured findings of meta-analytical review not obscured by ‘publication bias’ (Rothstein et al. 2006).

# Research Methodology — **Data Collection**

- In keeping with TBL focus, keyword searches concentrated on three domains **(1) economic, (2) environmental, and (3) social**.
- To gauge significance that UN ascribes to these three domains, this research queried all 25 reports for nine search phrases of interest according to TBL emphasis: **(1)** “economic development”, “economic growth”, “economic justice”; **(2)** “sustainable development”, “environmental sustainability”, “environmental justice”; **(3)** “social development”, “social responsibility”, “social justice”. [“Construct validity” ensured (Punch 2014, pp. 238, 240)].
- Adobe Acrobat PRO DC (Creative Cloud 2018) used to carry out ‘Advanced Search’, querying each phrase as ‘whole words only’. All occurrences subsequently collated and analysed through multiple data collection and analysis cycles to ensure “test-retest reliability” (Punch 2014).

# Study Contribution **to the Literature**

- **This research contributes to a more holistic and equitable human development discourse in key UN policy documents. It opens fresh meta-analytical perspectives (Bryman 2016, p. 692) that shape TBL-related priorities in seminal UN development discourse.**
- By offering inclusive and integrated perspectives, the study makes an important contribution to the literature, given that “conventional wisdom and academic disciplines falsely treat the economy as separate from society, or falsely treat the economy and society as separate from ecology. This silo thinking is unhelpful to social change.” (Salleh 2016, p. 1)

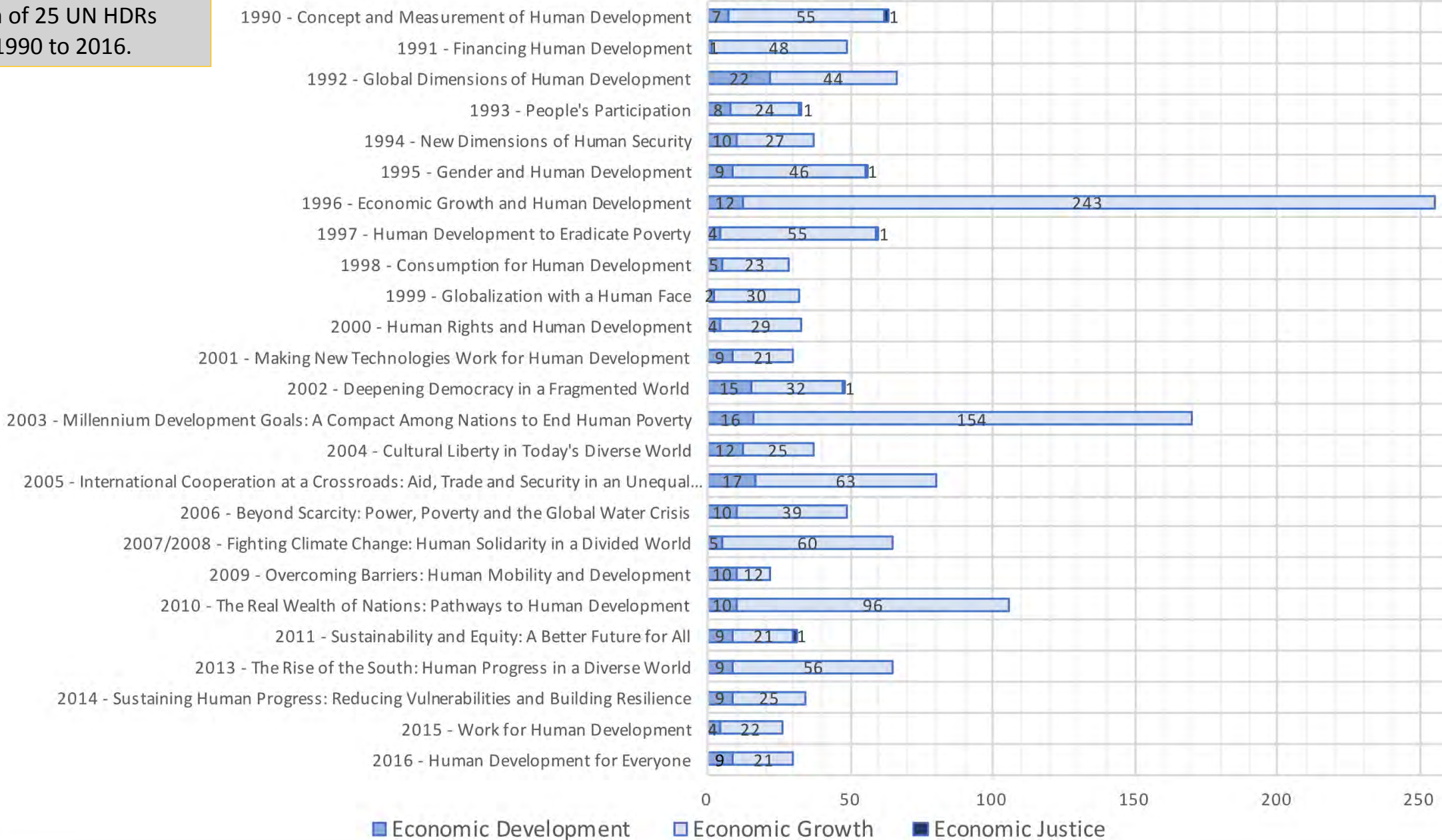
# Quantitative Data

Human Development Reports (HDRs) with year of publication	Economic Development	Economic Growth	Economic Justice	Sustainable Development	Environmental Sustainability	Environmental Justice	Social Development	Social Responsibility	Social Justice
1990 - Concept and Measurement of Human Development	7	55	1	3	0	0	5	0	0
1991 - Financing Human Development	1	48	0	3	0	0	4	1	1
1992 - Global Dimensions of Human Development	22	44	0	26	0	0	5	0	0
1993 - People's Participation	8	24	1	9	0	0	8	0	2
1994 - New Dimensions of Human Security	10	27	0	15	1	0	13	0	0
1995 - Gender and Human Development	9	46	1	9	2	0	18	2	3
1996 - Economic Growth and Human Development	12	243	0	5	1	0	10	0	1
1997 - Human Development to Eradicate Poverty	4	55	1	7	0	0	14	0	1
1998 - Consumption for Human Development	5	23	0	25	9	0	8	1	1
1999 - Globalization with a Human Face	2	30	0	4	4	0	14	3	0
2000 - Human Rights and Human Development	4	29	0	3	0	0	8	1	7
2001 - Making New Technologies Work for Human Development	9	21	0	7	1	0	0	3	1
2002 - Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World	15	32	1	7	4	0	7	10	8
2003 - Millennium Development Goals: A Compact Among Nations to End Human Poverty	16	154	0	45	46	0	12	1	6
2004 - Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World	12	25	0	8	2	0	13	0	5
2005 - International Cooperation at a Crossroads: Aid, Trade and Security in an Unequal World	17	63	0	6	2	0	3	0	21
2006 - Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis	10	39	0	26	15	2	12	0	13
2007/2008 - Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World	5	60	0	29	10	0	2	0	20
2009 - Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development	10	12	0	6	0	0	1	1	1
2010 - The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development	10	96	0	5	11	0	8	0	1
2011 - Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All	9	21	1	32	40	12	0	0	4
2013 - The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World	9	56	0	8	6	0	4	0	4
2014 - Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience	9	25	0	31	3	0	2	1	3
2015 - Work for Human Development	4	22	0	80	24	0	3	1	4
2016 - Human Development for Everyone	9	21	0	141	16	0	6	3	7
Total number of occurrences (all reports combined)	228	1271	6	540	197	14	180	28	114



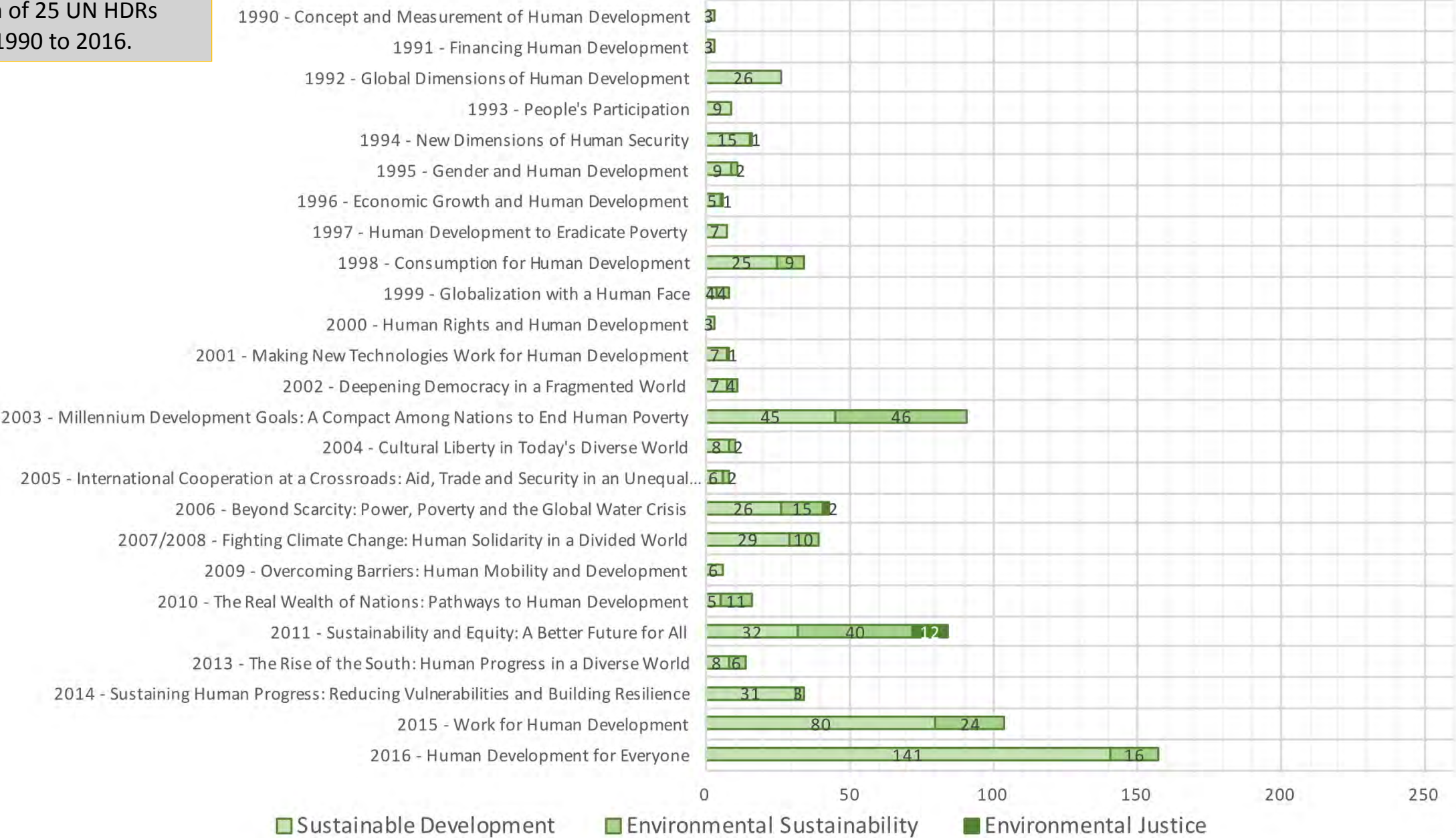
**Economic perspective:**

Frequency graph of 25 UN HDRs published from 1990 to 2016.

**ECONOMIC**

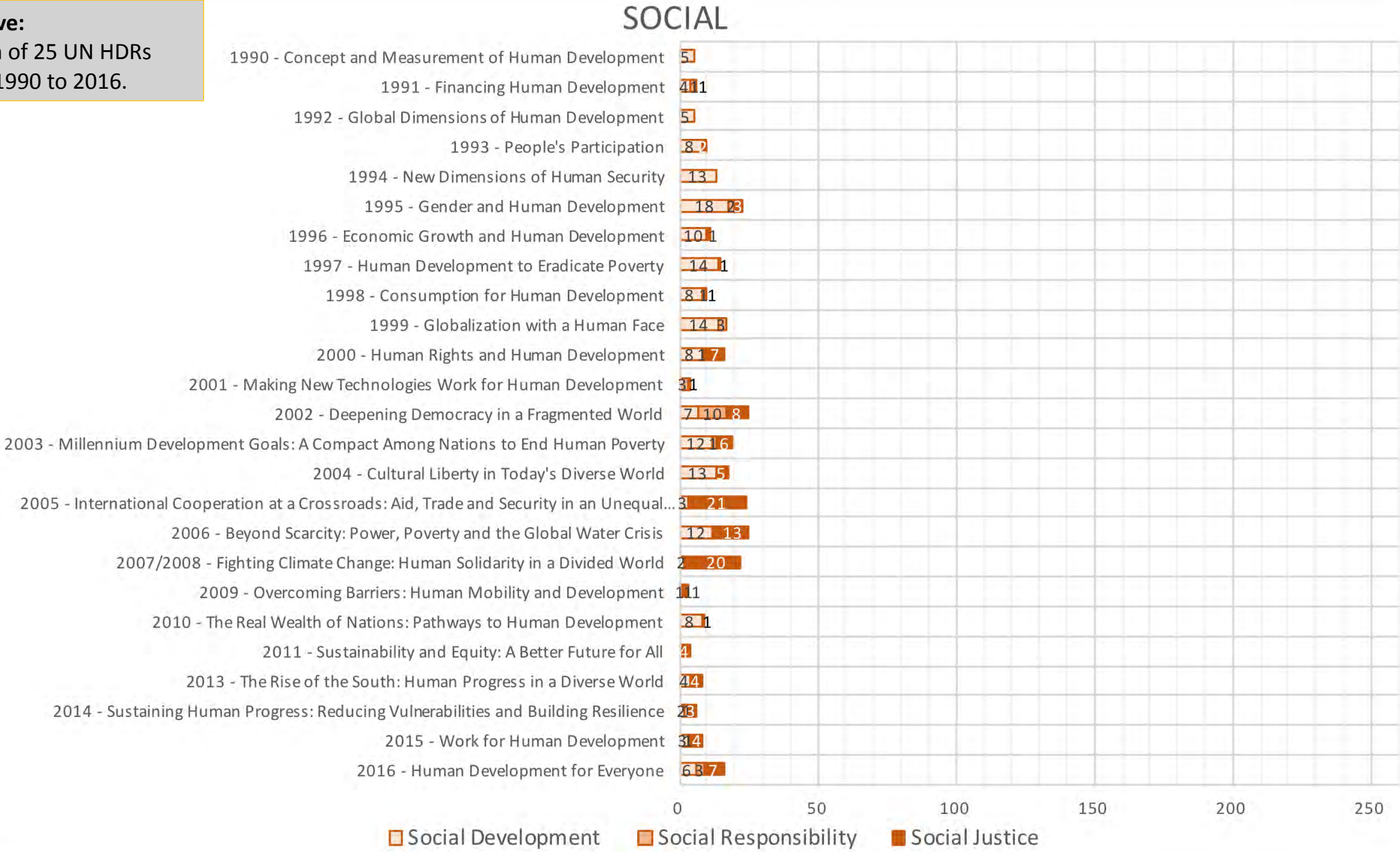
**Environmental perspective:**  
Frequency graph of 25 UN HDRs published from 1990 to 2016.

ENVIRONMENT





Social perspective:  
Frequency graph of 25 UN HDRs  
published from 1990 to 2016.



# Research **Findings**

- **Economic emphasis** (blue) emerges as the most dominant perspective;
- **Environmental emphasis** (green) emerges as the second-most dominant perspective;
- **Social perspective** (orange) emerges as the overall weakest emphasis.



**Combined (Absolute values):**  
Frequency graph of 25 UN HDRs published from 1990 to 2016. Sums of three colour-coded columns added together.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORTS WITH YEAR OF PUBLICATION (TBL) (Σ)



**Combined (Percentage figures):**  
Frequency graph of 25 UN HDRs  
published from 1990 to 2016.  
Values expressed as percentage  
figures.

## HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORTS WITH YEAR OF PUBLICATION (TBL) (%)

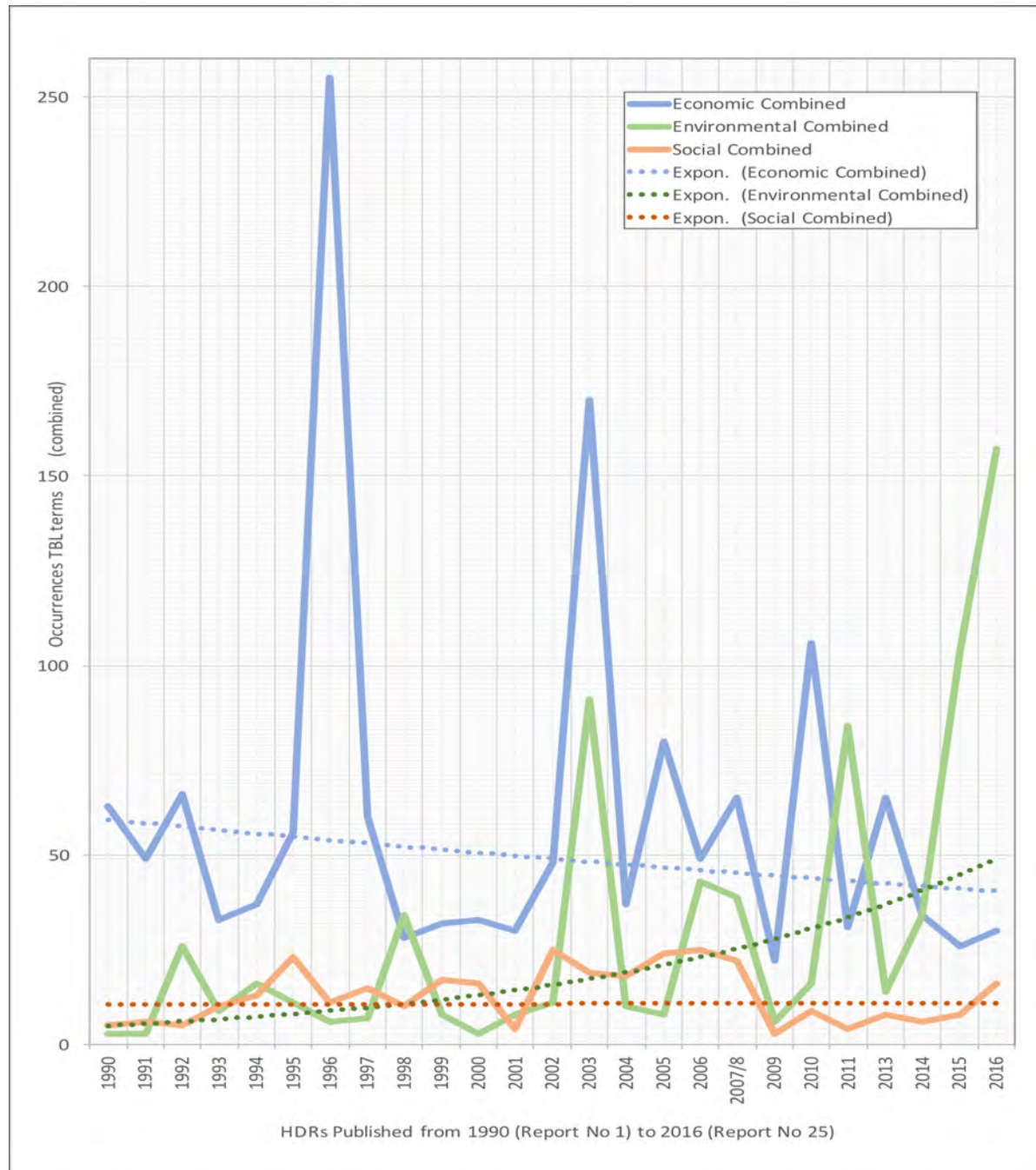


# Research Findings — **Synthesis**

- **Quantitative data obtained from systematic keyword searches carried out in all 25 UN Human Development Reports (HDRs) published to date reflect a predominance of ‘economic’ perspectives in UN HDR development discourse.**
- Further, there is a sense that over recent years ‘environmental’ or ‘sustainability’ considerations have gained currency. Finally, emphasis on ‘social’ development is overall and continuingly weak.
- Expressed differently, ‘economic’ perspectives dominate ‘sustainability’ and ‘social’ perspectives by a factor of 2 and 4.67 respectively.



# Quantitative Data

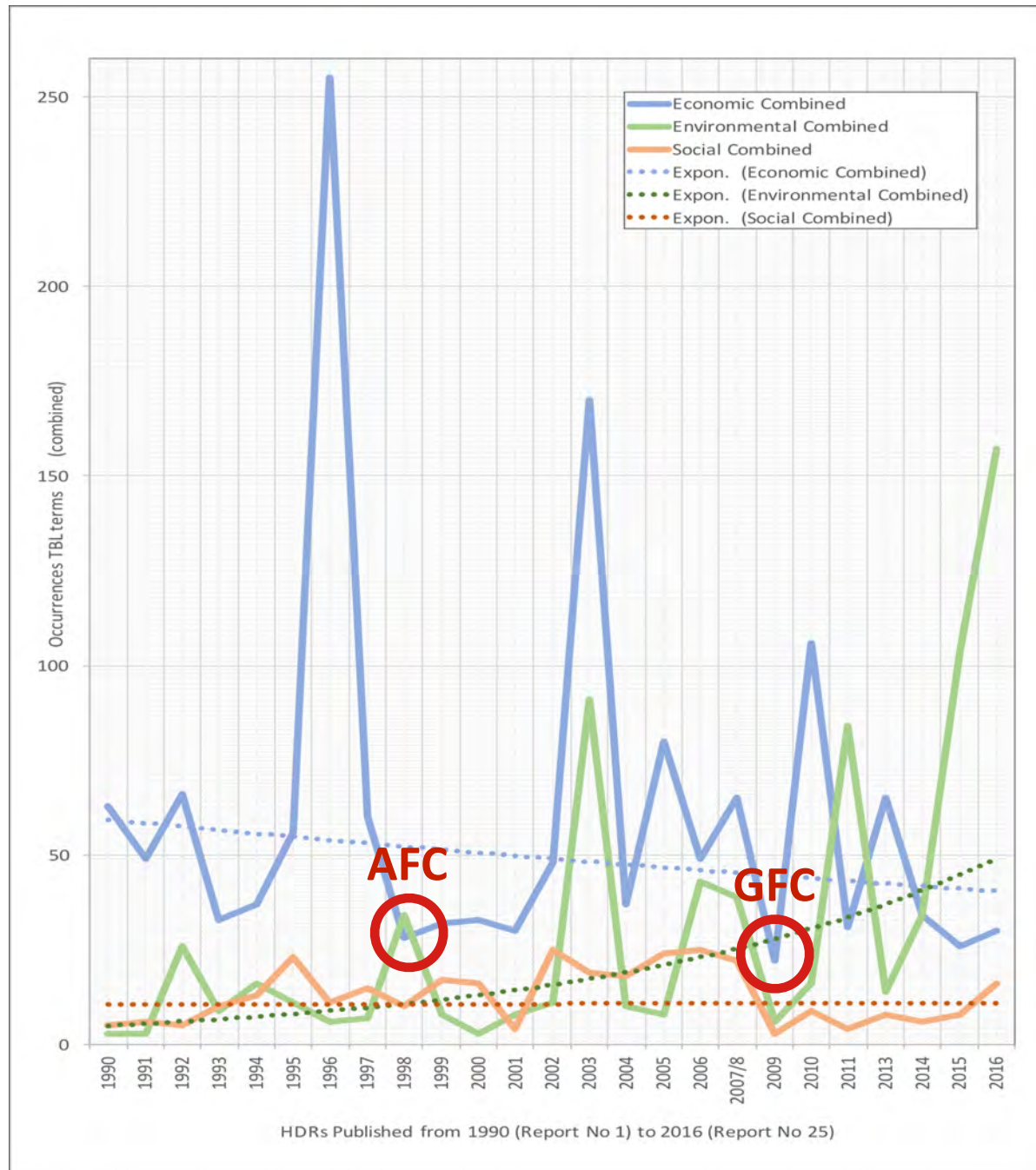


- **Time series for 25 HDRs published from 1990 (Report No 1) to 2016 (Report No 25):**
- The time series shows a weakening of the currency of economic terms over time, and an increase in currency for environmental / sustainability perspectives. Social perspectives are overall and continuingly weak.

# Discussion — Crises Quickly Forgotten?

- Incidentally, the two years with the overall lowest counts of 'economic' terms were 1998 (which followed the Asian Financial Crisis 1997), and 2009 (which followed the Global Financial Crisis 2007-2008).
- Even so, any corollary enlightenment that may have been gained did not have any lasting effect, as exemplified by the 2010 UN HDR entitled *The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development* (UNDP 2010), which swiftly reconfirmed the UN's prioritisation of global 'economic' aspirations.

# Quantitative Data



- Time series for 25 HDRs published from 1990 (Report No 1) to 2016 (Report No 25):
- In international development discourse, “social justice aims to create equal worth, equal rights, opportunities for all and the elimination of inequalities reinforced by poverty.” (Commission for Social Justice 1994, cited in Ledwith 2005, p. xv). Hence the conspicuous absence of the ‘social’ dimension in HDR development discourse hints at deeper normative issues surrounding inequality.

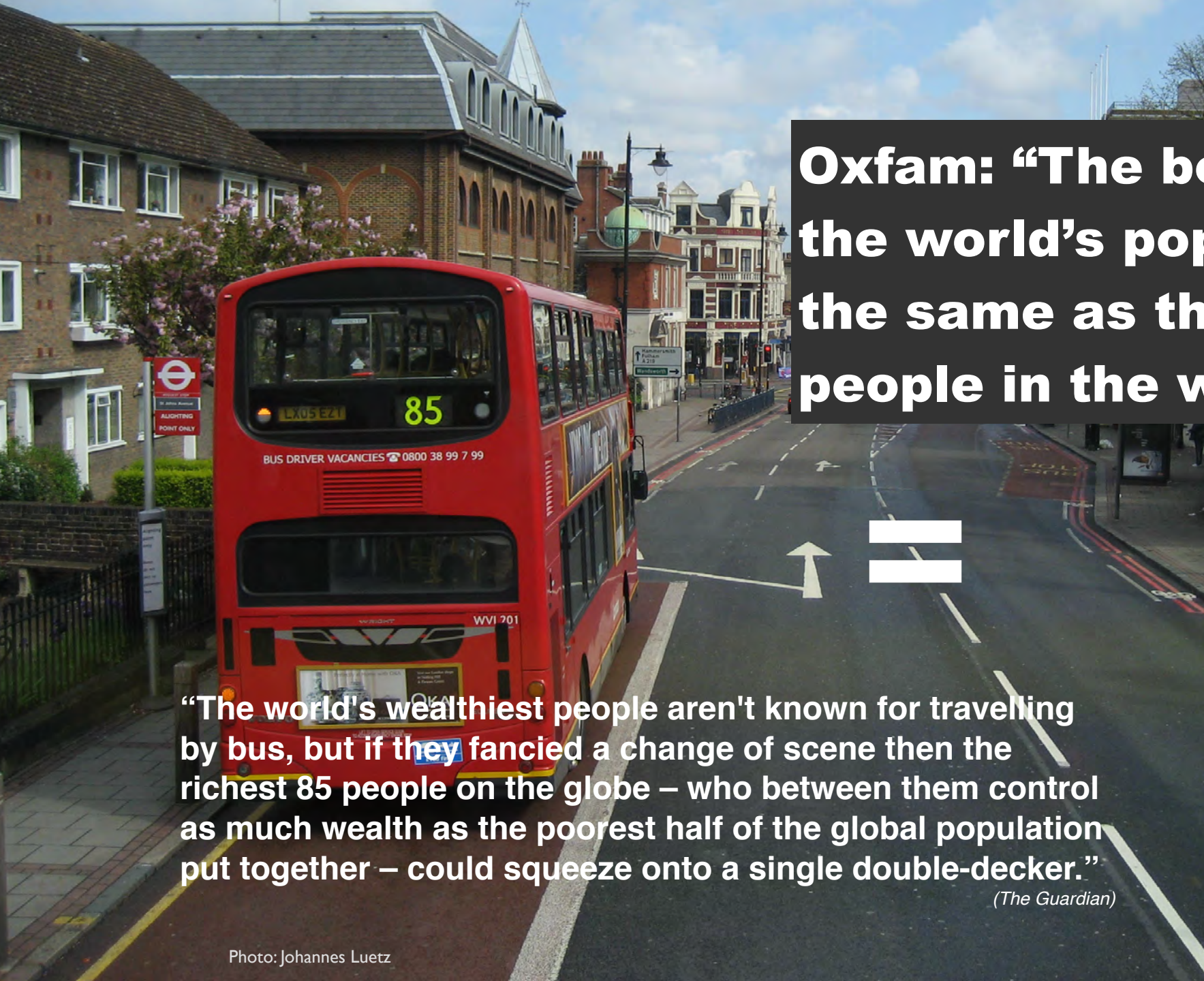
# Discussion — **What About (In)equality?**

**Given that UN HDRs have recurrently addressed the increase in inequality in the world, it has to be asked why the UN is unable or unwilling to offer any compelling corresponding discourse on ‘social justice’? For instance, the 1992 HDR acknowledged in blunt language a definitive UN awareness of:**

**1992**

“disturbing new analysis of the global distribution of income and opportunities - demonstrating that income disparities have in recent years widened dramatically. **In 1960, the richest 20% of the world’s population had incomes 30 times greater than the poorest 20%. By 1990, the richest 20% were getting 60 times more.** And this comparison is based on the distribution between rich and poor countries. Adding the maldistribution within countries, the richest 20% of the world’s people get at least 150 times more than the poorest 20%.” (UNDP 1992, p. 1, emphasis added)



A red double-decker bus is shown from the rear, driving on a city street. The bus has the number '85' on its destination sign and 'LX05 E21' on its license plate. It also displays 'BUS DRIVER VACANCIES 0800 38 99 7 99' and 'WVI 201'. The background shows a typical city street with buildings and a clear sky.

**Oxfam: “The bottom half of the world’s population owns the same as the richest 85 people in the world.”**

**“The world's wealthiest people aren't known for travelling by bus, but if they fancied a change of scene then the richest 85 people on the globe – who between them control as much wealth as the poorest half of the global population put together – could squeeze onto a single double-decker.”**

*(The Guardian)*

Photo: Johannes Luetz

A satellite view of Earth from space, showing the Western Hemisphere. The Americas are visible, with the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west. The image shows the curvature of the planet and the distribution of land and water.

Photo: NASA



# Discussion — **What About *Rising* (In)equality?**

**More recently, the 2015 HDR acknowledged that inequality in the world had increased yet again:**

**2015**

“In recent years rising incomes around the world have been accompanied by rising inequality in income, wealth and opportunities. [...] With regard to global wealth, inequality is substantial. In fact, a small elite takes a large share of global wealth. The richest 1 percent held 48 percent of global wealth in 2014, a share projected to be more than 50 percent in 2016. Around 80 percent of the world’s people have just 6 percent of global wealth [...] **Indeed, just 80 individuals together have as much wealth as the world’s poorest 3.5 billion people. Such inequality has become a serious problem — both for economic efficiency and for social stability.**” (UNDP 2015, p. 65, attributed to Oxfam 2015)

# Discussion — **What About (Un)sustainability?**

**Under the present global economic system “growth” and “sustainability” seem to be incompatible:**

“The last line of defence for advocates of indefinite global economic growth is that it is needed to eradicate poverty. This argument is at best disingenuous. By any reasonable assessment it is claiming the impossible. Here’s why. During the 1980s, for every \$100 added to the value of the global economy, around \$2.20 found its way to those living below the World Bank’s absolute poverty line. During the 1990s, that share shrank to just 60 cents. This inequity in income distribution - more like a flood up than a trickle down - means that for the poor to get slightly less poor, the rich have to get very much richer. It would take around \$166 worth of global growth to generate \$1 extra for people living on below \$1 a day. [...] Perversely, under the current economic system, reducing poverty by a tiny amount will necessitate huge extra consumption by those who are already rich. To get the poorest onto an income of just \$3 per day would require an impossible 15 planets’ worth of biocapacity. In other words, we will have made Earth uninhabitable long before poverty is eradicated. If we are serious about helping the poor rather than the rich, we need a new development model.” (Simms 2008, p. 49, emphasis added)

# Discussion — **What About (Un)sustainability?**

## **Scientists have recurrently warned that...**

“[a] transition to sustainability cannot be achieved if our economic system is not radically changed, simply because limitless economic growth is impossible within a limited planet.” (Pacheco et al. 2018, p. 238; cf. Hoekstra and Wiedmann 2014; Kendall 1997; Meadows et al. 1972; Ripple et al. 2017).

## **Scientific analysis concludes that the...**

“GDP-growth-focused economic model has led to severe wealth inequality as well as culturally entrenched aspirations for material consumption. It has encouraged growth well beyond our basic needs and beyond what can be supported by the carrying capacity of a single Earth.” (Hoekstra and Wiedmann 2014, cited in WWF 2016, p. 91)

# Discussion — **Synthesis**

- **Overall, our data suggest that the UN remains doggedly espoused to ‘economic’ development as its sole panacea for poverty reduction, which it now advocates under the guise of ‘sustainable’ development.**
- It appears that the present global economic system accentuates inequalities, rather than redress or alleviate them. At the same time, UN HDRs continually advocate ‘economic growth’ as a solution instead of identifying it as a problem. Hence ‘social’ concerns remain side-lined in HDRs as a thinly veiled fringe concern.

# Conclusion

- In summary, UN HDRs have not yet found a way to meaningfully acknowledge and include the 'social' dimension within human development discourse. Expressed in triple bottom line lingo, the UN's policy tripod to date leans overwhelmingly on 'economic' and 'sustainability' (growth) perspectives but painfully lacks any strength in its third 'social' leg.
- This research recommends realigning the UN's (neoliberal) normative narrative in favour of 'social' concerns (Hickel 2015, Henriques 2010). This may include integrating a measure of "social footprint" within the UN Human Development Index as advocated by Henriques (2010, pp. 169-171).

# Limitations & Future Research Opportunities

- **Widened keyword search scope may encapsulate additional data sources** (e.g., World Bank World Development Reports (WDRs), published annually since 1978, among others).
- **Extending scope of research internally within HDRs to other phrases of interest** (e.g., 'corporate responsibility' or 'CSR'), or to conduct comparative analyses between reports, e.g., HDRs and WDRs.
- **Scrutinising ideological and/or ideational differences** between the World Bank's WDRs and the United Nations Development Programme's HDRs may shed light on important differences that govern dissimilar institutional, ideological/normative or theoretical frameworks for development.
- **Broadening meta-analytical review scope to HDRs published in languages other than English.** Rothstein et al. (2006) caution that authors of systematic reviews "do not restrict their searches to those studies published in the English language, as evidence suggests that trials published in languages other than English may have different results than those published in English" (p. 51; attributed to Egger et al. 1997; Jüni et al. 2002).

# Thank you!



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