

Thematic Issue Proposal Form

Date of Proposal: 6 March 2025

Name of Thematic Issue: The Anthropocene Reframed: from human impact to human agency for just and sustainable futures

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Description of Theme:

This special issue seeks to harness frontier research on human development in the Anthropocene, to inform the 2026 Human Development Report (HDR) and marshal evidence on the critical role of human development and agency in imagining and driving transformations towards just and sustainable futures – for both people and planet. The sharp distinctions traditionally drawn between humans and nature in many of the social and natural sciences, have often hindered a holistic understanding of socio-ecological systems. By interrogating these divides, this special issue seeks to promote a unifying conceptual framework that embeds human development, human capabilities and human individual and collective agency within our planetary system.

The Anthropocene – “the age of humans” – has been characterized by humans’ negative impact on our planet, primarily through industrial-led economic development patterns. Yet improving human conditions do not inevitably come at the expense of damage to our natural world, in many places across the world humans and human societies act as stewards of nature, shaping biodiverse and ecologically vibrant places.¹ Meaningful progress has also been made, globally, to stall negative trends. Changes in energy and transportation systems, as well as social norms related to nature, open new opportunity spaces for sustainable development. Recent Human Development Reports (HDR) find that the level of CO2 emissions and material footprint required to sustain a given Human Development Index level has decreased over time.²

The way global challenges are framed affects how people interpret what is possible and necessary to shape a better future.³ An emerging body of research aims to reframe the Anthropocene not only as crisis, but as a testament of human ability “to act in the face of earth system transformation.”⁴ Building on these advances, this special issues seeks to ground efforts in a unified conceptual framework, sustained by empirical analysis and new metrics proposals, to bridge the gap between human development and nature.

Central to this thematic issue is the integration of human-nature relationships into the Human Development and Capabilities Approach. This exploration includes the role of relationships,

particularly human-nature relationships, in shaping human well-being and agency. How people interact and relate to each other is an important determinant of wellbeing.⁵ Both social connectedness and nature connectedness – understood as quantity and quality of connections with each other and with nature – is generally associated with positive outcomes in important human development dimensions, such as physical and mental health.^{6,7,8} Indeed, as humans are inherently part of nature, wellbeing frameworks that do not consider the environment are incomplete.⁹ Similarly, agency can also be understood through a relational lens,¹⁰ including our ability to define and achieve collective goals – such as sustainable development.¹¹ The recent 2023-2024 Human Development Report shows how (perceived) agency gaps are associated with stifled collective action and global gridlock.¹²

Integrating human agency within the conceptualization and modelling of socio-ecological systems is a promising field of research, which can further our understanding of human development and help reverse or reshape negative planetary trajectories. A key focus will be on understanding the constraints and opportunities for reversing negative environmental trends while maintaining progress in human development. A critical assessment of systemic barriers - such as inequalities – to human agency in the Anthropocene, alongside an examination of implicit assumptions in some prevailing development frameworks and approaches, can shed light on blind spots and provide novel insights for action. For example, crisis framings, while putting climate change on the policy agenda, have not been enough to motivate action and may, in some cases, also have contributed to phenomena such as climate anxiety, issue fatigue, and political polarization.¹³ Understanding the role of perceptions and attitudes, and how these shape both personal decisions and social interactions is especially important for guiding action in the Anthropocene, as many of the challenges – ranging from biodiversity loss to plastic pollution – require both individual and collective action, at global scale.

By addressing these intersections, this special issue will contribute to a richer understanding of the Anthropocene's implications for human capabilities, well-being, and sustainable development, and can illuminate pathways towards sustainable development action at multiple scales. The papers in this issue will inform the 2026 Human Development Report yet remain free-standing and independent pieces of research.

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¹ See, for example, the "Good Anthropocene" database with 500+ "seeds" or case studies of transformative change towards just and sustainable futures: Seeds of Good Anthropocene 2025.

² UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) 2024.

³ Bietti, Tilston and Bangerter 2019; Shi, Visschers and Siegrist 2015; Vlasceanu and others 2024.

⁴ Otto and others 2020., Waldow, Baruges and Chandler 2024. also see initiatives such as: Seeds of Good Anthropocene 2025.and "The Anthropocene Lab 2025.

⁵ Mahoney and others 2024.

⁶ Hoffman, Mehrpour and Staerklé 2023; Lange and Crawford 2024.

⁷ Pritchard and others 2020.

⁸ Lomax and others 2024; Tillmann and others 2018.

⁹ Betley and others 2023.

¹⁰ one's ability to meaningfully participate in social/community life is a key tenet of human development. Sen 1995; Sen 1999.

¹¹ Pelenc, Bazile and Ceruti 2015.

¹² UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) 2024.

¹³ Hickman and others 2021; Cunsolo and others 2020; Gurr 2021; Morrison, Parton and Hine 2018.

Topics:

We welcome papers that will seek to:

- Assess the Anthropocene experience across different human development levels, including contemporary environmental challenges in relation to human development and the prospects for, or constraints upon reversing current negative environmental trends.
- Move beyond human-nature dichotomies, which are prevalent in many social science fields, and advance towards unifying concepts that embed human development, human capabilities and agency within our planetary system, including considerations for future generations.
- Explore relational approaches to human development, conceptually and empirically.
- Investigate how people and societies seek to achieve positive relationships with nature, at what scale, under which conditions, and by which means/tools (for example through codifying rights of nature and future generations in law), as well as critically examining barriers to positive human-nature relationships.
- Explore how diverse actors and institutions are mobilizing their agency to enable stewardship of nature in the Anthropocene, including how local and bottom-up initiatives might be scaled up.
- Propose new ways of measuring human development and human agency in the Anthropocene, including assessments of positive human-nature relations at scale as well as metrics that transcend human-nature dichotomies and consider future generations.
- Leverage novel technologies or assess how novel technologies may be leveraged to advance human development.

Proposed process and timeline:

- Call for Papers: Beginning of March 2025
- Abstract submission deadline: 18 May 2025
- Notification of abstract acceptance: 22 June 2025
- Tentative online workshop with authors: September 2025
- Final papers due: 19 December 2025
- First round of reviews: January–April 2026
- Second round of reviews: April–July 2026
- Third round of reviews: July–late August 2026
- Guest Editors' introduction to the Special Issue: Second half of August 2026
- All final copies sent to production: September 2026
- Publication of the issue: November 2026

Submission Procedure

Please first submit an abstract of 500 words to Josefin Pasanen (josefin.pasanen@undp.org), Pedro Conceição (pedro.conceicao@undp.org) and Victor Galaz (victor.galaz@su.se) **no later than 18 May 2025**. Proposals should include the author name/s, short biographies, affiliation/s and a contact email address.

Following review of abstracts, authors will be notified no later than **22 June 2025** whether a full paper will be invited for submission. **Please note that an invitation to submit does not imply acceptance of papers.**

If you are invited to submit a full paper, please submit full papers online at: <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/cjhd>. According to the JHDC's guidelines for preparing manuscripts, please send the paper identified as 'Main Document', with all information identifying the authors removed to allow it to be refereed anonymously.

When submitting, please choose 'special issue article' as the manuscript type, and 'The Anthropocene Reframed' as the special issue name.

Complete instructions for authors can be found at the publisher's website:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?journalCode=cjhd20&page=instructions>

The deadline for submission of full papers is **19 December 2025**.

The Special Issue will be published in **November 2026**.

For enquiries, please contact Josefin Pasanen (josefin.pasanen@undp.org), Pedro Conceição (pedro.conceicao@undp.org) or Victor Galaz (victor.galaz@su.se).