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# Toward the Use of Human Resource Development for Societal Development: Issues, Challenges, and Opportunities

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## Abstract

### The Problem.

Although current human resource development (HRD) theory does not adequately address the issues and challenges faced by larger contexts, the methods originating from traditional HRD have been increasingly recognized as useful and effective interventions to deal with problems and issues that occur beyond a single organization or group of organizations.

### The Solution.

To address the gap between traditional HRD frameworks and the social reality of complex and large system change projects, this article identifies major issues that encompass typical use of HRD for societal development (SD), including community development, international development, and organizations' social responsiveness, and emphasizes the usefulness of organization development approach for SD.

### The Stakeholders.

Multiple stakeholders, such as HRD professionals in the public sector, HRD students, nongovernmental organizations, policy developers, and nonprofit organizations, all of whom engage in SD in various contexts, can take advantage of these scholarly efforts to broaden the scope and boundaries of HRD.

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societal development, community development, international development, social responsiveness

Interest in the use of human resource development (HRD) for purposes of societal development (SD) has been growing recently. Based on reviews of relevant HRD literature, it can be concluded that, although current HRD theory does not adequately address the issues and challenges faced in larger contexts, such as community, country, or international agencies in terms of the purpose, scope, level, tools, or outcomes, methods originating from traditional HRD have been increasingly recognized as useful and effective interventions to deal with problems and issues that occur beyond a single organization or a group of organizations.

Responding to the increased interest and scholarly discussions on the use of HRD for SD, this *ADHR* issue explores how traditional HRD approaches that describe and interpret the change process in a single organization have been applied to solve broader societal issues around the world by means of case studies and conceptual interpretations. As a result, a clear need for the HRD field to broaden its horizon to include the public good beyond managerial and organizational proliferation has emerged.

This article summarizes findings from the application cases and conceptual exploration introduced in this issue of *ADHR* and synthesizes the issues or problems reported, as well as challenges and opportunities faced in the use of HRD for SD.

**The Use of HRD for SD: Issues, Challenges, and Opportunities**

In this issue, a pool of knowledge and practices has been collected regarding the nature and practice of HRD in SD. Based on the application cases and conceptual exploration of the use of HRD for SD reported in this issue and in relevant literature, three major issues emerge that encompass typical use of HRD for SD: (a) community development, (b) international development, and (c) organizations' social responsiveness. In this section, the main interventions used and the challenges and opportunities identified related to each issue or problem are presented.

**Community Development**

HRD is used for development in a variety of levels or areas: a neighborhood, a community, a village, or a region. In fact, this approach appears to be a widely used application of HRD for SD. Many application cases introduced in this issue addressed specific issues and problems at the community level.

The issues and problems vary depending on the community's social, economic, and cultural contexts. A synthesis of the findings from the cases reported by McLean, Kuo, Budhwani, Yamnill, and Virakul (in press), and Budhwani and McLean (in press) in this issue, as well as additional related literature (e.g., Jha & Kumar, 2000; Johnson, Bartlett, Cunningham, Lynham, & der Marwitz, 2010; Kuo, Yamnill, & McLean, 2008; Razvi & Roth, 2010; Virakul & McLean, 2010) shows that typical issues and problems at the community level include health and safety, women's issues, adult literacy, poverty, and the public education system. Although it is surprising to find such a wide range of issues approached by HRD, this diversity appears to be inevitable in that the well-being of a group of people or a society must be addressed in all life domains (Finnis, 1993), and HRD is suitable to serve equally a set of public issues beyond work-related domains (Kuchinke, 2010). In terms of change agents, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play an important role in developing change efforts and in leading the change process. Other change agents include local governments and higher education institutions.

While HRD tends to be used to address micro-level or local issues in underdeveloped or developing countries, in economically more developed countries in Asia, such as Korea or Bahrain, and even in the United States, HRD is used or has been attempted to be used at the broader level of regions or areas, such as a city (Byun & Ryu, in press; Griffiths & Maraghi, in press), or a state (Ahn & McLean, 2008, 2010). In these cases, the major motivations to use HRD for SD are to expand life-long learning opportunities for citizens or to build a knowledge infrastructure. In such efforts, a systematic approach marked by collaboration and partnership among local and central government agencies is noticeable.

Another popular intervention used for societal HRD is large-scale organization development. Judging from descriptions of each case in this issue, a common approach to community issues and problems is a large-scale action research model that includes various modes of activities (Budhwani & McLean, in press; Byun & Ryu, in press; McLean et al., in press). Within the action research approach, training and education are typically used, especially to enhance the knowledge and skills of personnel, including volunteers, teachers, or leaders in the community (Budhwani & McLean, in press; McLean et al., in press), as well as government personnel (Byun & Ryu, in press). Adult literacy education is commonly introduced (Baatjes & Mathe, 2004; Byun & Ryu, in press; McLean et al., in press; Ramirez, 1990). Training content is focused on awareness enhancement or specific skills development. Sometimes, mentoring, coaching, or counseling is used to help underprivileged persons who are identified as leaders (Budhwani & McLean, in press; McLean et al., in press). In some cultural circumstances, development of the role of women in the area is a major activity (Budhwani & McLean, in press).

The HRD approach to community development faces challenges. As shown in various case studies in McLean et al., professionals and consultants who dealt with the community development projects were often brought from outside the community.

In case of community development projects funded by international development agencies, the roles of key member of the projects are primarily advisory or research focused (Metcalf & Rees, 2005). Local community members seem to become more involved as those projects progress and increase their roles through ongoing development activities (Byun & Ryu, in press; McLean et al., in press). The competencies that local leaders or officers develop are gained through learning by doing. In this regard, it is said that community leaders, trainers or educators, government officials, or volunteers may not be adequately prepared for their roles due to lack of previous education or experience.

As discussed in many articles in this issue and in other literature, NGOs are key stakeholders whose staff members actively engage in the change process. It should be noted that many volunteers involved in community development are not professionals and are not properly trained to implement large-scale change processes and effective interventions. Therefore, training and education for such personnel are essential components of the development process, particularly in the developing world (Budhwani & McLean, in press; McLean et al., in press). It is also often the case that government officers are not professionally prepared to deal with a systematic approach to SD (Byun & Ryu, in press; Griffiths et al., in press).

The importance of sensitivity to cultural diversity is revealed in many articles in this issue. Because the use of HRD for SD appears to be more actively pursued in non-Western countries, a global perspective is important when working in community development. According to Budhwani and McLean, and McLean et al., cultural values and belief systems significantly influence community development practices. Therefore, sensitivity to diversity is essential in understanding cultural, regional, ethnic, and religious issues (Budhwani & McLean, in press) and executing organization development efforts (McLean et al., in press).

A large-scale approach to community development requires active involvement by many stakeholders, including governmental agencies, NGOs, and educational institutions. The success of development projects depends on how the collaborating agencies work together. Harmonious and effective partnerships, networking, and collaboration are essential in complex change efforts at the societal level.

These challenges found in community development approached by HRD suggest opportunities to develop HRD for SD theory and practice. In order to educate, train, and prepare HRD professionals to work in such SD contexts, HRD curricula and programs should be reexamined. Deeper cultural knowledge and enhanced technical expertise are required for large-scale action research projects in the public domain. Such challenges provide career opportunities for HRD professionals and can increase the contributions of the HRD field to SD. Furthermore, efforts to foster development and promote learning in civil societies or to enhance the quality of education at higher levels in more developed countries, such as Korea (Byun & Ryu, in press) or Bahrain (Griffiths et al., in press), will enable those societies to establish governance systems that embrace the philosophy of fairness, equity, and advancement for all. In this process, HRD can provide underpinning theoretical foundations and good examples of practices for SD.

## *International Development*

HRD can be effectively applied for international development as a part of SD. Numerous international development projects that are geared to enhance standards of living are under way around the world, although they are not often reported in the literature (McLean et al., in press). The issues that are dealt with in these projects include health and safety (Johnson et al., 2010; Virakul & McLean, 2010), social justice (Budhwani, Wee, & McLean, 2004; Chat-uthai & McLean, 2003; Kuo et al., 2008; Moon & McLean, 2003) and poverty (Razvi & Roth, 2010). The article by Mace, Venneberg, and Amell (in press) in this issue shows how an international problem, such as human trafficking, can be approached by HRD.

Core interventions used in most international development projects include staff training, leadership development, counseling, coaching/mentoring, capacity building, knowledge management, and action learning. Particularly, organization development (OD) approaches accompanied by training and education are widely used. Due to the complexity and depth of international problems and issues, such interventions must be holistic, large scale, and multifaceted, as described by Mace et al. (in press) and must be pluralistic in nature, not assuming one best remedy. In designing and implementing international development projects, the roles and interests of international development agencies and NGOs are noticeable (Metcalf & Rees, 2005).

Challenges in dealing with societal issues at the international level are varied but are basically similar to the challenges faced in community development in that both require cultural sensitivity and knowledge and skills to deal with large-scale practices. However, in spite of challenges embedded in international development projects, larger societal issues that have an impact on individuals, communities, nations, and the world have potential to be investigated, explained, or affected by application of certain HRD efforts in partnerships of governments, international agencies, and NGOs.

## *Organizations' Social Responsiveness*

HRD for SD is also applicable within traditional organizational contexts. Even though HRD is sometimes criticized for pursuing management interests rather than the well-being of employees and the wider community (Bierema & D'abundo, 2004), recent HRD research and practice actively articulate the ethical responsibility of organizations toward people, communities, and the environment in an increasingly global and transparent marketplace. For example, outstanding corporate social responsibility activities are reported in HRD literature from a global perspective (Kahn & Budhwani, 2011; Virakul, Koonmee, & McLean, 2009). Although application cases in this category were not reported in this *ADHR* issue, Stolz (in press) and Wang (in press) conceptually explored how organizations can respond to social trends or demands and become responsive in creating better social conditions by addressing societal issues within the context of business organizations.

In a way of enhancing organizational responsibility for society and its impact on the lives of people, Wang (in press) and Stolz (in press) argued for the usefulness of organization development approaches in this *ADHR* issue. Wang pointed that social entrepreneurship is an example of organizational efforts to foster social progress and is well suited to community development in developing countries, where many intertwined social problems exist (Cornwall, 1998). Although a clear strategic understanding and tool-set for managing corporate citizenship has not yet emerged, Stolz argued that involvement with corporate citizenship, aligned with organization development efforts, is essential because corporations face issues of societal responsiveness. In the process, shared vision and value, participatory management, and catalytic leadership development are considered to be critical.

The benefits of corporate social responsibility for a community or the organization itself are controversial and call for further investigation because the key challenge of increased organizational social responsibility to HRD is to balance commitment to societal goals with performance needs of employees and organizations. In reality, these commitments potentially conflict, and compromise is difficult. Accordingly, promoting management interests while making a difference in the lives of employees, customers, and local communities can be challenging.

Nevertheless, organizational engagement in societal issues using diverse modes of approach, such as corporate citizenship or social entrepreneurship, can result in initiatives for increased involvement by corporations in global and societal governance. It is important that HRD become a partner in addressing societal problems and issues in organizations. By taking advantage of such participation, HRD can be better positioned to promote change in individuals, organizations, and society.

## Implications for HRD Theory and Practice

The responsibility of HRD can be applied not only to management but also to employees, customers, and the broader community because investment in HRD can influence business, social, and environmental performance (Bierema & D'abundo, 2004; Hatcher, 2003). This *ADHR* issue demonstrates how innovative approaches guided by HRD principles and skills have made a difference to the community, society, and the world. Based on critical observations reported throughout this issue, it is argued that HRD resides no longer solely within an organization or organizations to fill the corporate wallet. Bearing this in mind, implications of the findings regarding issues, challenges, and opportunities that HRD faces when applied to SD are summarized as follows.

Above all, the concept of HRD for SD should be introduced and explored in the HRD field (Kuchinke, 2010). In particular, given that SD naturally requires large-scale, multifaceted approaches, an interdisciplinary framework is critical (Frank & Yeager, 2011). In this regard, HRD and its subset, OD, which is academically based in multiple disciplines, have strengths to accommodate such practices in theory and research development. Scholarly efforts to theorize the use of HRD for SD should be strengthened to transform traditional HRD theory, especially OD, at a single

organizational level, into a broader, multilevel theory and wider context to address the gap in existing theoretical constructs between traditional HRD theory, especially OD, and the social reality of complex and large system change projects. Such research could reshape the current scope and boundary of the field.

When HRD is used for SD, multiple stakeholders are engaged, as seen in most of the case studies reported in this *ADHR* issue. These stakeholders include NGOs, non-profit organizations, and private for-profit organizations, in addition to governmental agencies. Although some of these organizations have appropriate contexts and capacity to launch and execute large-scale change projects, there is clearly a need for improvement. In fact, many workers in the SD context are assumed to gain their field experience mainly through trial and error, given the lack of theoretical background and formal exposure to the field of HRD. These workers can take advantage of the broader scope of information described in the scholarly efforts reported in this issue.

Inclusion of SD activities in HRD holds the promise of more opportunities for HRD professionals who have interests in the public sector that require different sets of expertise. Judging from reports in many of these case studies, the competencies required to work for SD should be more inclusive than those of traditional HRD professionals, considering the complexity and diversity in the levels and scopes of tasks. Reviewing the issues, challenges, and opportunities faced in the use of HRD for SD, some of the competencies, such as sensitivity to cultural diversity, teamwork and partnership building, moral integrity, multitasking, and empathy and flexibility, are already apparent. In addition, the importance of political negotiation in HRD work and professions should be recognized as networking, partnership, or collaboration among agencies and personnel are repeatedly emphasized. Research to identify relevant competencies would be required and would make an important contribution to our understanding of the use of HRD for SD.

Identification of professional competencies in HRD for SD inevitably leads to a need for redesign and development of current HRD curricula in academia. In fact, several interesting training programs are found in Asia. According to Metcalfe and Rees, the Academy of HRD in India developed an innovative program that is designed to enhance Asian NGO leaders' knowledge and skills in the areas of OD and succession planning. In ActionAid in Pakistan, a regional office of ActionAid that is an international NGO whose aim is to eradicate poverty worldwide, a separate division in HRD/OD exists (Metcalfe & Rees, 2005). This division is created for their people to play an active role as a change management advisor across NGO offices in Asia. These are good examples of responsive HRD programs focused on increasing needs for HRD for SD. Accordingly, the suggestion for redesign and development of existing HRD and OD curricula should be seriously considered to accommodate the needs for working in HRD for SD (McLean et al., in press).

As this *ADHR* issue was originally conceptualized from a global perspective stressing the broader SD orientations of HRD, it is critical to broaden the horizons for conducting research. How do we develop research ideas and problems? On what do we focus? Where do we collect data? From what phenomena do we develop theory?



Depending on the answers to these questions, discussions on the use of HRD for SD can be significantly different. More diverse sources of data and research will help the field to be more receptive and contemporary in an ever-changing world.

## Conclusion

This *ADHR* issue explored the application of standard HRD approaches to the challenges presented by efforts for SD based on cases and conceptual investigations reported by a variety of perspectives of authors. These reports lead to the conclusion that HRD broadly, and OD specifically, can be combined successfully with SD. This combination has strong potential for advancing theories of HRD, as assumptions, concepts, and methods used in various practices will ultimately expand existing theoretical constructs of HRD for SD practice. It is hoped that this issue provides an introduction to the field of HRD to the many practitioners in SD who have not had formal exposure to HRD but are confronted with issues in their field that could be addressed through HRD principles, concepts, tools, and methods.

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## Bios

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