

## From Manufacturing to Social Development: Assessing the Role of SM Foods in Education, Employment, and Community Support in Multan

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### ABSTRACT

In developing countries, businesses often help with the social and economic challenges that cannot be dealt with by the state. This study examines SM Foods, a leading food manufacturing company based in Multan, Pakistan. It examines SM Foods' contributions to the economy and development from the perspectives of corporate social responsibility and the Millennium Development Goals. Data were collected using a qualitative case study approach, through in-depth interviews with the founder, selected employees, university students, interns, and graduates who transitioned to the labor market, as well as direct field observations along with documentary evidence. Based on studies, SM Foods has been found to contribute significantly towards education, employment generation, women's empowerment, environmental sustainability, and industry-academia collaboration. The company presents a development-oriented corporate model by focusing on women's employment, internship program, participation in job fairs, payment of taxes, and eco-friendly production. Moreover, it has formal collaborations with universities through memoranda of understanding for skill development and enhancement of employability. According to this research paper, manufacturing firms based locally can serve as human development partners by aligning business objectives with social goals. The study shows that indigenous enterprises can deliver national and global development outcomes through sustained and embedded social engagement. This makes an important contribution to CSR and development studies.

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### 1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an important framework for understanding the relationship between business and society. This is particularly the case in developing countries where the state has limited capacity to provide social welfare and economic opportunities (Crane et al., 2019). In the past, companies were seen essentially as profit-maximizing organizations with social responsibilities limited to employment and taxes. Today's literature reveals that firms or businesses, particularly those that are embedded in the local economy, may play a more extensive role by promoting education, skills, social infrastructure, and institutional capacity building in order to play a wider developmental role (Crane et al., 2019). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted in 2000. This has been a significant shift in the international agenda, focusing on poverty reduction, health improvement, universal education promotion, gender equality, and environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2006). The MDGs emphasize the inclusion of the private sector as a major partner in the realization of development objectives. This is especially the case where governments face limitations in finances, administration, and governance. According to a UNDP report published in 2006, Pakistan is confronted with various structural challenges, which are a lack of jobs, a lack of skills, and regional disparity among other Global South countries in the direction of the outcome of MDGs (World Bank, 2019). The context-specific form that CSR takes in developing countries has linkages with the peculiarity of their socio-economic conditions. According to

(Visser, 2008), CSR in the Global South focuses more on development issues like education, jobs, and community rather than reporting. In the West, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is understood as signaling for publicity for branding purposes. For instance, environmental signals, market signaling, etc. The real measure of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in developing countries will be its impact on human development's resilience.

Pakistan is a more relevant case for the examination of such context-driven CSR. Despite the growth of the private sector, public investment in higher education, vocational training and job facilitation has often lagged behind demographic growth (Sun & Dagogo, 2025, pp. 63-78). The universities, especially those outside major metropolitan centers, have limited industrial linkages, resulting in graduates having strong theoretical knowledge but limited practical knowledge as per the job market requirements (Owner, SM Foods, personal communication, December 2025). Simultaneously, companies report hardship in obtaining qualified and work-ready employees, signifying an ongoing mismatch between education and employment (Sun & Dagogo, 2025). Locally based manufacturing companies are more strategic in this regard. Local firms are more attached to the community and regional economy, unlike multinational companies. Their practices in the field of employment, collaboration with educational institutions, and work with the community can generate direct and lasting developmental effects. However, few empirical studies have been done on the CSR practices of such companies in non-metropolitan cities, which can restrict their possible contribution to the development process (Jamali & Mirshak, 2007). The objective of the paper is to conduct a qualitative case study of SM Foods, a food manufacturing firm based in Multan, to explore how a firm that was established locally can contribute to social development through educational support, job provision, industry-academia collaboration, and community engagement. The study seeks to explore a central concern of development-oriented CSR research by situating the analysis in the framework of Millennium Development Goals, human development theory, and embedded CSR. How can the local manufacturing companies assist the government initiatives for advancing human development and socio-economic sustainability in developing countries? This study contributes new empirical evidence from Pakistan, mostly from a non-metropolitan region, the Southern Punjab, to the CSR and development literature. Moreover, it calls for CSR studies to examine relevant contexts by looking at actual development outcomes of corporate behaviour and not just symbolic giving.

### **1.1. Problem Statement**

Corporate social responsibility has emerged as a powerful paradigm in understanding the place of businesses in the social and economic growth of developing nations. The private sector has been listed as a significant partner in the international development agendas, such as the Millennium Development Goals, which recognize the significance of the sector in addressing the challenges relating to education, employment, and human development (United Nations, 2006). It has been determined that businesses can also offer development not only by being philanthropic but also by engaging in long-term workforce development, skills building, and institutional collaboration (United Nations Development Programme, 2010). Although this is an increasing awareness, empirical studies on CSR are not balanced. The majority of the literature is concentrated on multinational companies or business organizations based in large metropolitan areas, whereas little attention is given by scholars to locally based manufacturing businesses in non-metropolitan cities. CSR in Pakistan is commonly taken to mean charitable activity, and little exploration has been done on how local companies can help in education, employability, and local development in a structured and long-term manner (Jamali & Mirshak, 2007). Meanwhile, universities in non-metropolitan cities are experiencing chronic problems with poor industry connections and employment prospects among graduates. The discrepancies in skills and the lack of exposure to practical training are still issues of concern (Sun & Dagogo, 2025). This paper fills these gaps by discussing the socio-economic contribution of SM Foods in Multan in terms of supporting education, generating job opportunities, and participating in community development; hence, it provides context-based evidence on CSR and human development in Pakistan.

## **2. Literature review**

Corporate social responsibility has evolved from narrow concerns regarding charity to a wider framework based on the social, economic, and developmental responsibilities of firms. In developing countries, CSR is identified as a remedy for structural deficits such as poverty, unemployment, poor education, and lack of state capacity. According to scholars, CSR in these

situations should be measured on the basis of development impact and not on the basis of formal reporting or reputational strategies (Visser, 2008). The introduction of the Millennium Development Goals was a landmark event in recognizing the private sector as a development partner. According to the United Nations (2006), business has a role to play in the MDGs in the field of education, employment, gender, and business-government partnerships, especially in those countries where governments are institutionally and financially constrained. Subsequent research has stressed that companies can contribute to human development by producing decent work, investing in human capital, and empowering local institutions (United Nations Development Programme, 2010).

The human development approach is an effective way of explaining CSR beyond income generation. This framework has a central role that puts employment and skill development as the major ways through which businesses can enhance social well-being by focusing on capabilities, education, and opportunities (Sen, 1999). Empirical evidence suggests that the participation of the private sector in training, internships, and workforce development can dramatically enhance the employability and social mobility of developing economies (OECD, 2019). Industry-academia partnerships have been gaining momentum as a remedy to the employability issue of graduates (Ragmoun & Alfalah, 2025; Ragmoun & Ben-Salha, 2024). The Triple Helix Model is a model that conceptualizes development as a result of interaction between universities, industry, and government (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). In emerging economies, this type of cooperation is especially essential because of the scarcity of resources to conduct practical training in universities. It has been demonstrated that internships, job fairs, and formal partnerships enhance the process of education-employment transition (OECD, 2019).

The CSR studies in the Pakistani context emphasize the prevalence of the philanthropic meaning and the insufficient institutionalization of CSR with the development orientation. Jamali and Mirshak (2007) observe that although most companies are involved in social activities, the activities are not well planned and recorded. In addition, locally based companies that are not located in large cities are not well represented in academic literature, even though they are significant in terms of regional growth and job creation (Mujahid & Noman, 2018). This paper will be based on these literature strands by analyzing a local manufacturing company in a non-metropolitan setting and, thus, will give empirical evidence to the discussion of CSR, human development, and industry-academia partnership in Pakistan.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study is applied in various ways to three complementary theories that offer a comprehensive understanding of the development role of business in developing countries. They are the Millennium Development Goals, human development theory, and embedded CSR. Through the combination of these frameworks, an integrated analysis of the way a locally embedded manufacturing firm can add value to the social and economic development can be realized. The Millennium Development Goals offer a normative and policy-oriented framework that acknowledges the role of the private sector as a major partner in the process of dealing with poverty, lack of education, employment issues, gender inequality, and environmental sustainability. Contrary to the previous development paradigms that put the state in the center of primary responsibility, the MDGs clearly focused on partnership with business to mobilize resources, generate employment, and facilitate human development in the situation of low state capacity (United Nations, 2006). This framework comes into play, especially when examining CSR practices in Pakistan, where development issues remain at the regional level. The human development theory, as defined by Sen (1999) and operationalized by the United Nations Development Programme, changes the perspective of development analysis away from income growth and to the growth of the capabilities and opportunities of people. In this view, employment, education, and skill development are key processes by which people can increase their life opportunities. Business input to internships, workforce training, and employability is directly related to this framework in terms of enhancing human capital and social mobility (United Nations Development Programme, 2010).

These approaches are further enhanced by the concept of embedded corporate social responsibility, which highlights CSR practices integrated into the main business operations rather than viewed as peripheral or philanthropic activities. Embedded CSR in developing country settings depicts long-term commitment with the local communities, educational institutions, and

labor markets, with the resulting development effects being sustained (Visser, 2008). The combination of these views leads to the conceptualization of SM Foods as a locally-based development player that can be studied through its CSR practices in the context of their role in human development and MDGs-consistent goals.

### **3.1. Objectives of the Study**

1. To investigate the socio-economic position of SM Foods as a locally rooted manufacturing company in Multan.
2. To examine how SM Foods has contributed to education and skill development by collaborating with industry and academia in the form of industry-academia collaboration and internship programs.
3. To determine the contribution of SM Foods to the employment and workforce development and graduate employability.
4. To determine the alignment of the CSR practices of SM Foods with the principles of human development and the Millennium Development Goals.

### **4. Research Methodology**

This paper is a qualitative case study that will be used to analyze the socio-economic role of SM Foods in its real-life and institutional context in Multan, Pakistan. The case study design would be especially suitable for research that aims to comprehend complex social processes like corporate social responsibility, industry-academia partnership, and human development, in which the demarcation between organizational practice and social environment is tightly interwoven (Yin, 2018). SM Foods was chosen purposively, as it has been operating as a long-term, locally based manufacturing company and has been involved in education, employment, and community support programs in a non-metropolitan area. The primary data were gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with the founder of the company, a few of the employees, as well as university students on internship, and graduates who had entered the labor market after their internship. Some of the participants asked to remain anonymous because of professional reasons, and it was observed in full compliance with the requirements of the commonly accepted ethical research guidelines. The secondary data were collected by reviewing memoranda of understanding with educational institutions, as well as institutional documents and other policy and academic literature. Secondly, field observations of production facilities and workplace practices were also made to provide context to the responses of interviews and increase the depth of the empirical information. The data were analyzed thematically; interview transcripts and documentary materials were systematically coded, leading to the identification of patterns about education support, employability, workforce development, gender participation, and community engagement. By triangulating multiple sources of data, the researcher was able to gain valuable insights into this issue. The ethical principles for this research included informed consent, confidentiality, and the ethical disposal of data in line with qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

### **5. Findings and Discussion**

In this section of the article, we are presenting and interpreting the findings of the research study based on the qualitative evidence collected through interviews with the owner of SM Foods, anonymous employees, interns, and graduates who entered the labour market after the completion of their internships. The primary insights from field observations and relevant institution documents allow for a comprehensive context-sensitive analysis. The discussion places the findings within existing theories of corporate social responsibility, human development, and the Millennium Development Goals. Consequently, we link the micro-level organizational practices to wider development discourses, which nuance the firm's developmental role.

#### **5.1. Leadership Vision, Entrepreneurial Experience, and Development Orientation**

One of the major findings of the research is to highlight the importance of leadership in aligning SM Foods with the CSR and development vision of the enterprise development programme. In an interview with the founder, Ch. Zulfiqar Anjum stated that his extensive experience in multinational food companies has largely influenced the firm's standards, operational philosophy, and social outlook. The decision to set up SM Foods in Multan instead of big cities was made deliberately, he said, adding that SM Foods will generate local employment. This leadership style concurs with academic discussions that CSR in developing nations is mostly motivated by the values of their owners and not necessarily by the formal regulatory forces

(Jamali & Mirshak, 2007). The fact that the founder has been investing in the upgrade of machinery on many occasions and at a high cost shows a long-term orientation that puts emphasis on quality, sustainability, and competitiveness. Using modern production systems that result in minimal environmental waste, as confirmed through field observations, there can be assertions of environmentally responsible production. From a theoretical point of view, this finding corroborates the embedded CSR hypothesis, which states that social responsibility can play an active role in the decision-making processes of businesses rather than being merely symbolic (Visser, 2008). The leadership vision, therefore, forms a driving force linking the business performance with the social outcomes.

## **5.2. Employment Generation and Regional Economic Stability**

SM Foods is generating employment on a huge scale that contributes a lot towards socio-economic development in Multan. According to management and employees, the firm has a large workforce that consists mainly of people from surrounding communities. According to various workers' testimonies, SM Foods provides stable income opportunities within the region, as formal industrial employment is very limited.

An important finding is that the firm has deliberately opted for manual labour, particularly at the packing stages, despite automation. What the owner says, "This decision means an ethical commitment to maximizing employment when there is so much unemployment." (Owner, SM Foods, personal communication, December 2025). This approach fits perfectly with human development theory, which emphasizes employment as a key means for augmenting individual capabilities and enhancing household security (Sen, 1999).

Anonymous workers noted that localized employment policies lower commuting expenses, enhance local connections, and lead to social unity. In terms of development, these localized job creations will help reduce poverty and directly achieve MDG 1, which aims to eliminate extreme poverty and hunger (United Nations, 2006).

This evidence substantiates the claims by UNDP that the creation of employment is among the most effective means by which businesses can help in the developmental outcomes in the low- and middle-income countries (United Nations Development Programme, 2010).

## **5.3. Women Workforce Participation and Gender Empowerment**

This study reveals a striking empirical finding: that seventy percent of the workers in the production units of SM Foods are female. Interviews with the management and female employees demonstrate the company's active employment of women, especially in operations and packaging. The women working in SM Foods said that through formal employment, they could manage their finances independently, scale up in-house decision-making power, and elevate social standing.

This practice fully supports MDG 3 on "Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women." SM Foods' model leads to women's economic participation in an industrial space, unlike symbolic gender inclusion policies, which are common in many parts of Pakistan.

According to the literature on human development, women's employment has multiplier effects on the education, health, and welfare of families (Sen, 1999). The results, hence, indicate that the employment practices at SM Foods have wider social benefits outside the workplace. The data also shows stakeholder-oriented corporate social responsibility, which refers to the responsibility of businesses toward social groups who are marginalized in their operational environment (Crane et al., 2019).

## **5.4. Education Support, Internships, and Industry-Academia Collaboration**

Another great outcome is that SM Foods is continuously associated with universities in Multan. The company has signed formal memoranda of understanding (MoU) with Muhammad Nawaz Sharif University of Agriculture, Multan, and Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU), Multan, Food Science departments. Through interviews conducted with interns and instructors, it was revealed that the partnerships with the industries expose the students to the industrial processes, quality control systems, and the overall work environment.

Interns at SM Foods said that their work discipline and technical knowledge related to the job improved due to SM Foods. Several graduates who had undergone internships later got placed in the food sector, either in SM Foods or outside it, indicating an employment end-to-end process.

This implication of the finding supports the Triple Helix Model, which envisages development that results due to interplays between universities, industry, and government (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). Industry partnerships are important in enhancing graduate employability in a scenario where universities are usually not equipped to provide practical training.

In the MDG perspective, such initiatives will support MDG 2 by providing education and MDG 8 by promoting partnerships towards development (United Nations, 2006). This is also supported by evidence from the OECD, which indicates that employer engagement enhances labor market outcomes among graduates (OECD, 2019).

### **5.5. Job Fairs, Market Exposure, and Employability Outcomes**

SM Foods connects with students and graduates as one of the informal mechanisms. Participation in university job fairs and career exhibitions is an important aspect. Based on interviews conducted with SM Foods interns and university representatives, job fairs with the company allow students to access employers and information about career paths, internships, and jobs.

During the meetings with graduates entering the labour market, a feeling that came up regularly expressed was that it had a favorable impact on their uncertainties and assured their confidence in the job search. According to the study in 2019, it has been observed that the employer's involvement in the activities of career development helps increase the employability and reduces the school-to-work transition gap (OECD, 2019). These practices exhibit embedded CSR, indicating that workforce development is part of the daily business process rather than the employability being something that is not at the core of the business.

### **5.6. Community Support and Social Infrastructure Development**

Along with education and employment projects, SM Foods contributes to the welfare of communities through donations to schools, libraries, labs, hospital facilities, dispensaries, and water purification plants. The engagement of the local stakeholders and employees has shown that these programs fulfill the urgent need of the time, especially in the under-resourced communities.

These contributions can be seen within the context of the overall human development model that identifies health, education, and basic infrastructure as constituents of well-being (United Nations Development Programme, 2010). Although these activities are similar to the acts of traditional philanthropy, their sustained and focused nature appears to be a strategy in community development instead of being a charitable act of a haphazard nature.

These findings are in line with the arguments that in developing countries, corporate social responsibility (CSR) often fills service delivery and governance gaps that are vacated by the state (Visser, 2008).

### **5.7. Environmental Responsibility and Sustainable Manufacturing**

Field observations confirmed that SM Foods has systematically adopted high-tech equipment designed to minimize material waste and reduce negative environmental externalities. As stated by the founder in conversations with us, the constant reinvestment in an upgraded technology has become a firm priority. Further, it is part of an agenda whose goal is to obtain international environmental and quality standards and to fulfil these standards. This plan fits with MDG 7, related to ensuring environmental sustainability in the production and consumption of goods and services.

Recent research on sustainable manufacturing indicates that environmental stewardship is not only a moral duty but also a strategic imperative for organizational survival in the long run. As Crane et al. (2019) state, the adoption of environmentally responsible technologies and the implementation of sustainable production processes can enhance operational efficiency as well as reduce life-cycle costs, while improving firms' legitimacy can be maintained in global

value chains. SM Foods' experience illustrates how local businesses can incorporate sustainable production systems while continuing to be significant job providers. By being committed to sustainable innovation rather than trade-offs, the firm strengthens ecological performance while simultaneously augmenting social and economic contributions. This further strengthens the development agenda of sustainable development.

SM Foods has incorporated a modern system for purifying flue gas in its production line, which strictly removes dangerous emissions before their release. The imported technology uses the proven emission control devices like electrostatic precipitators and scrubbers to eliminate sulphur oxides, nitrogen oxides, fine particulate matter, and other pollutants contained in the combustion exhaust in line with the modern-day industrial air pollution control practices (Britannica). What remains after this multistage cleaning process is primarily moisture-laden flue gas, which consists mainly of water vapor. When this saturated gas is released to the cooler external air, the water vapor becomes supersaturated and condenses to form fine liquid droplets. The resulting visible plume, which is often called white smoke, is therefore a condensation process as opposed to actual smoke, which is full of pollutants (KLEAN ESP; BurnerTec). In controlled emission control systems, a white plume like this is often a sign that the majority of toxic substances are eliminated and that the exhaust that is released into the stack is mostly condensed vapor that can be seen under certain ambient conditions.

### **5.8. Tax Compliance, State Capacity, and Institutional Responsibility**

The other aspect of corporate social responsibility that has been largely neglected in the context of sustainable business performance is tax compliance, which indicates the organization's adherence to institutional responsibility and national development. In the example of SM Foods, the owner claimed that the company is considered to be among the top corporate taxpayers in Pakistan, and it is ranked number 18 in the list of the top taxpayers in the fiscal year 2024-25. The sense of paying taxes is, in this regard, not just a legal responsibility but a civic responsibility, which is the basis of the successful operation of the state and the delivery of public goods.

Modern development literature views tax compliance by the business community as a meaningful input to the capacity of the state and holds that the ability to pay taxes regularly empowers the state's finances and increases its capability to provide social services and infrastructure (OECD, 2014). This observation expands the traditional CSR model by indicating that institutional responsibility, such as compliance with tax obligations, is as significant as environmental and social programs towards complete corporate citizenship.

### **5.9. Integrating CSR Practices with MDGs and Human Development Theory**

On the whole, the results show that the CSR activities of SM Foods are most closely associated with MDGs, which refer to the reduction of poverty, educational processes, gender, environmental sustainability, and developmental partnerships. The firm has not tried to impact all MDGs symbolically, but instead, its contributions are based on local priorities based on local needs.

This trend favors academic contributions that demonstrate the effectiveness of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in a contextually relevant manner rather than in a generic way (Visser, 2008). SM Foods also demonstrates how locally entrenched firms can be development partners in areas with low state capacity through the combination of employment, education, and community involvement in its business model.

### **5.10. Policy Implications**

The study's findings have vital implications for public policy in developing countries like Pakistan, where the state alone has limitations to fill the gaps in education, employment, and welfare. To begin with, the SM Foods case shows that locally embedded manufacturing firms can become effective development partners with the support of enabling policy frameworks. Policymakers, therefore, should not consider CSR as merely voluntary charity but should integrate it into development strategies at the national and provincial levels. A commitment to skill development, women's employment, environmental sustainability, and community infrastructure should be incentivized through tax credits, recognition or fast-tracking of regulatory processes in order to encourage the wider private sector participation in human development goals (OECD, 2019; United Nations Development Programme, 2010).

Moreover, the finding underscores the need for policies to institutionalize industry-academia collaboration. The MoUs between SM Foods and universities are proof of how structured partnerships enhance employability and reduce skill mismatch. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan and other higher education regulators must promote mandatory internships, the establishment of joint curriculum advisory boards, and industry-based skill certification programmes. Global evidence suggests that such linkages significantly and positively affect labour market outcomes and innovation potential in developing countries. In the absence of systemic policy support, these partnerships depend on individual leaders, and not on systemic change.

Moreover, the large-scale presence of women in the workforce of SM Foods has important implications for gender responsive labour and industrial policy. Policymakers should not restrict gender policies to limited actions relating to microfinance or the informal sector. Women's industrial employment must be seen as a major development strategy. Provision of safe workplaces and childcare, facilitation of travel, and incentives to firms for employing women in large numbers can help in multiplying social returns per unit of expenditure in consonance with human development theory and the gender equality objective of MDGs (Sen, 1999; United Nations, 2006). The SM Foods case shows how women can be brought into formal employment in an industrial context through commitment from leadership and support practices.

Finally, the research findings indicate that tax compliance and environmental responsibility are two important but overlooked aspects of CSR policy. Businesses that regularly pay their taxes and invest in clean production have a marked direct impact on state capacity and sustainability. Policymakers should view CSR as tax compliance and environmental upgrading and not as philanthropic spending. Recognition in development research is growing that well-designed taxation and industrial practices are instrumental in shaping governance and service delivery, whatever the source (OECD, 2014; Visser, 2008). By promoting transparency and rewarding compliant organizations, trust can be strengthened across the state, industry, and society.

## 6. Conclusion

According to the research reports, the embedded, locally based manufacturing firm can play an important role in the social development only when the corporate social responsibility is embedded in the core business strategy and not treated as an ancillary activity. The case study of SM Foods of Multan shows how continuous engagement with education, jobs, and community can generate real socio-economic value in a developing country. Fieldwork through interviews and discussions with the institution shows that the company has moved from being a production firm to a developmental organization. The systematic collaboration of the firm with universities and the provision of internships and other infrastructure development opportunities are contributing to human capital formation by equipping students with skills and enhancing employability, especially in subject areas having closer linkages with the regional economy.

Simultaneously, the local job creation in the company, the focus on the female labour involvement, and the realistically restrained automation demonstrate a socially sound model of industrial development, in which the income security, the social inclusion, and the social stability of the community are maintained. These outcomes are enhanced by continuous investment in education, health care, and infrastructure, responsible production, environmental consciousness, and a high level of tax compliance. Overall, the paper indicates that CSR is not an issue that can be restricted to the multinational corporations only, but also to the locally produced companies. Moreover, these companies can help the state in terms of development. The research may assist policymakers, academics, and practitioners in understanding how business leadership could facilitate the compatibility of commercial performance with the social and institutional advancement of developing nations over the long term by putting corporate activity in a broader context of human development.

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