

WHO is Development For?
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Introduction to *A Humument*

Tom Phillip's artistic form in *A Humument* discovers poetry within a set of possible words and then creates a visual experience that accompanies and interprets the poem. A combination of linguistic and visual art, *A Humument* establishes itself as the definitive seminal work in a unique artistic medium of color and text. Inspired by this work, the creator of "WHO is development for?" treats a page from a 1988 AIDS Coordination Group and Bureau Report to comment on how global development agendas interact with the life stories of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). The chosen text is representative of some of the early discussions among development actors during the beginnings of the HIV epidemic.

When asked about the revealed text in his Humument project, Tom Philips replied, "It is a poem. It is a poem. That's what it is. My poem." (Phillips). Though none of the words are his originally, Philips views his work as the result of his creative mind, as his poetry. The artist of "WHO is development for?" also views the remaining text as a poem despite its borrowed words and phrases. However, this poem isn't simply made to be appreciated at a distance. It serves a function, unfolds an argument, as it subtly interrogates the last thirty years of international HIV/AIDS policy.

A Poem and An Argument

The piece is divided into three distinct sections. In the first section, the icons of the sustainable development goals surround the words "projects priorities problems were identified with regard to AIDS". The sustainable development goals are an agenda set by the UN in 2015 to promote global development. They target economic, social, and environmental initiatives. Only goals that are listed as relevant to the AIDS epidemic on UNAIDS' website are included in the piece. These goals identify "projects", "priorities", and "problems" with specific statistical indicators, including the bold goal in SDG 3: "By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases." ("Sustainable Development Goal 3").

The answer to the question in the middle of the page is unsaid and yet clearly understood. In line with the alliteration found in the first words of the poem, development clearly ought to be for people; that is, development is a human construct that is justified insofar as it serves human flourishing. It is neither immutable nor inevitable. The SDGs establish global initiatives that have the force of normative claims, but who is development really for? Clearly, the artist does not mean for the question to undermine the goals themselves. Ending the AIDS epidemic is no doubt an aspiration worth aiming for. But in practice, development is a messy enterprise where poor understanding, profit motivations, and shortsightedness have been known to wreak havoc in the lives of marginalized groups. By using "WHO" instead of "Who", the artist signals to another iteration of the piece's namesake sentence: "development is for WHO." The World Health Organization, as well as other multilateral agencies like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and UNAIDS, influence development and health-related policy. Within the details of their work, the question must be asked again and again: who is this really for?

In the final portion of the piece, one circle in a group of eight is colored red to symbolize someone who is HIV positive. The words "we're all members of a Group" interact with this symbolism in a dual way. First, the artist seems to claim that PLWHA are not just atomized data points in global health actors' interventions and program evaluations. Rather, each individual is a member of a family, a faith community, a workplace environment, a school, or a small town. Each individual has relationships that make life meaningful. The eight dots represent a possible family in sub-Saharan Africa in 1988 when the total fertility rate of the region was 6.5 (World Bank). The text does not just say that PLWHA are members of a group but that we *all* are. This

implies a second meaning, that those who set development agendas are members of groups that have shaped them. Our ideologies become and stem from our identities. The original document on which this piece was created was published in Amsterdam, far from the epicenters of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. What are the implications of development agendas being set in the global north for the global south? How can we increase our understanding of the groups that PLWHA are a part of?

WHO is development for? nuances the linear development narrative with its simplistic progression from “developing” to “developed”. It hearkens to the necessity of the humanities in understanding human-made agendas meant to promote human flourishing. Life is experienced within relationships and stories, not mathematical agendas, within the mundane details, not pragmatic goals. The artist does not reject the value of global goals but rather pleads for development actors to seek greater understanding of themselves and the communities where they work.

WHO is development for?



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