

More information please

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A.H.M. KISHOWAR HOSSAIN

TODAY is World Population Day. This year, World Population Day highlights the importance of data for development. Demographic data provide an essential evidence base for the development and evaluation of policies. The bottom line is that "a country cannot develop without data." Although the term "data" has technical overtones, there is a fundamental connection between good data and good governance.

Accessible data functions as a public good, benefitting citizens and the political system as a whole. Bangladesh has adopted legislation giving citizens the right to demand information. Yet, legislation alone ensures neither data-inspired policymakers nor a public empowered to hold them accountable. In Bangladesh, access to data is often limited. When data is available, the formats are rarely "user-friendly" for non-professionals, thus restricting their potential applications.

Demand for data occurs at the local, regional, national, and international levels. At all of these levels, the census is especially important because it provides coverage of the entire population, allows for analysis by subgroups within the population, and is geographically reliable, even

for small areas and constituencies.

Although demand for data is generally viewed as increasing, the increase is coupled with considerable challenges to obtaining useful data at the local level and inadequate capacity to make full use of available data. Global initiatives with established goals, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), are increasingly putting pressure on developing countries like Bangladesh to quantify the outcomes of donor investments.

The adoption of results-based budgeting by international donors has had a positive influence on demand for data. Although international demand for data has had some benefits, sustainable data systems require strong internal demand. It is often seen that much of the demand for data is donor-driven, while local demand remains weak. Up to now, the main reason for collecting data was to satisfy donor demand, rather than for our own planning needs.

Another important thing related to data is the decentralised data collection system. Decentralisation shifts responsibilities to the municipal/district/local levels and reinforces the need for data. In reality, decentralisation has proceeded by fits and starts, impeded by lack of capacity at the lower levels of government. Until

these levels of government develop their own capacities, the motivation for national authorities to provide local-level data will be minimal.

Even when data are available, potential users may be unaware of their existence or their potential use. Poor dissemination is one of the causes of the inadequate use of data. In Bangladesh, it is seen that foreigners often have greater access to a country's data than the citizens of the country. Unlike local researchers, foreign researchers come from bureaucratic and statistical environments in which access to and use of data are commonplace.

Delays in the collection and release of data are also known to diminish demand for data from policymakers and the media. Timeliness is a serious problem. By the time data are collected, analysed, and findings released, the context may have changed and the data become less useful.

However, statistical offices may not be adequately staffed and supported to be able to process, release, and support access to data to the extent that they would like. The analytical report of Population Census 2001 was published in 2007, whereas the next census will be held on 2011.

The insufficient number of skilled individuals who can support data-collection and data-management efforts is another problem for data in Bangladesh. Only 3,794 staffs are working in Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics to serve the country of around 160 million people. In addition to these human resource constraints, technical difficulties arise. Even when useful technology

exists, limited resources present a further challenge to the supply of data.

The Bangladesh government can take some steps on data collection and data management systems. A proactive dissemination of existing data can be taken. A targeted initiative could get the data into the hands of users in forms they can understand and apply. This could help to bring data to policymakers and enhance awareness of the value and existence of data.

Data sets presented at a high level of aggregation frustrate many potential users. Disaggregated data are useful for policymakers at local levels, enabling them to access the evidence base and to cater to the specific needs of their constituencies.

Data producers, analysts, and consumers are not necessarily in close contact with one another. Increased communication among these parties may create a greater sense of the value of collecting and disseminating data. Donors increasingly require that data be made available from projects they fund.

It will be useful for donors to explore ways to ensure effective sharing and use of available data. Donor requirements should be specific so as not to impede the collection of new data when needed.

In conclusion, it can be said that there is a growing demand for data in Bangladesh. Access to data is limited by usability characteristics of the data, lack of expertise among users, and inadequate systems for making data available. Political will is more likely to



It's time for intelligent data collection.

be forged through broad engagement with these issues, rather than through the technical efforts of data producers/users alone.

Access to information is hindered when the lack of apparently useful data

reduces the interest of policymakers in data, and the lack of interest in data in turn marginalises the data producers.

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China bashing should stop

Instead of criticising China, the world should thank its policy makers for their bold actions. China has proven to be a responsible global player. It knows that its prosperity is tied to global economic recovery. According to some analysts, China alone is contributing one quarter of the total economic growth of the world.

CHAKLADER MAHBOOBUL ALAM

I N recent years, I have read a number of highly critical articles in the Western media about the Chinese economic policy: that it is creating a bubble economy, that it is ego-centric and not contributing to world economic recovery, that its currency policy is unfair and is designed not only to increase its exports (goods) but also to import (some use the expression "steal") jobs from around the world. One of the critics, James Chanos, a wealthy hedge fund investor thinks that its economy is hyper-stimulated and it will soon implode. In his words: "China is Dubai times 1,000 -- or worse."

Unscrupulous bankers, unfettered capitalism and unparalleled greed have placed us in the West in a very difficult economic situation. It is no exaggeration to say that 95% of the population is suffering in one way or the other from its adverse effects. What is even worse is that by all accounts people will continue to suffer for a long time to come. (Analysts are already warning us of a double-dip recession.) I understand all this. But to blame China for all this suffering is a bad therapy.

Actually, the US economic downturn triggered a huge fall in Asia's (including China's) GDP as well because international trade and finance virtually came to a standstill. Therefore, the global economic crisis hit China more or less at the same time as it hit Europe. But China rebounded from the downturn more swiftly than Europe.

Chinese policy makers were quick to react. Through a huge stimulus spending program and a successful bank lending initiative, they pumped billions of dollars into the economy, which reignited economic growth. It is estimated that its economy is growing by more than 10% per annum. Unfortunately, in most of Europe, the authorities have failed to persuade the banks to lend enough money to businessmen and industrialists. This tight credit policy is not only forcing many of them to go out of business and increasing unemployment but also stifling any budding growth in the economy.

Instead of criticising China, the world should thank its policy makers for their bold actions. China has proven to be a responsible global player. It knows that its prosperity is tied to global economic recovery. According to some analysts,



The world may be entering the first Chinese century.

China alone is contributing one quarter of the total economic growth of the world. It is leading a broad Latin-American and Asian recovery. The Chinese rebound -- China became the largest exporter in the world in 2009 -- is responsible for robust economic growth in Latin America and Asia which has maintained and/or created millions of jobs in these regions.

Ever increasing demand in China for commodities like iron ore, tin, copper, gold, etc is helping countries in these regions to experience steady economic

growth. China has become the top trading partner of Brazil and number two trading partner of Venezuela and Colombia. While Brazil is expected to grow by 7.3% in 2010, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador and Chile will also post significant GDP growth.

According to a report released by the IMF, China's trading partners in the Asia-Pacific region, which includes countries like South Korea, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, will grow by 5.8% in 2010.

China has already announced the end of the Yuan's peg to the dollar, which will help rebalance world trade and support growth in the US and Europe. In fact, the Yuan has already appreciated by several percentage points. In order to avoid protectionism in Europe and the United States, Chinese authorities are being asked to move faster in appreciating its currency.

But the Chinese policy makers still remember what happened to Japan in the 1980s, when the Japanese government

caved in to American demands for an appreciation of the yen. By 1988, the yen rose by more than 100% against the US dollar, sending the Japanese economy into a deflationary slump, which unfortunately, still continues.

In my opinion, China would do well to take steps with a view to appreciating its currency gradually and loosening its control on capital flows. At the same time, in order to avoid a financial bubble, it will have to keep a close watch on its monetary policy. Unfortunately, there are disturbing signs that the financial system has already become rather overheated.

Some analysts criticise China for holding more than \$2 trillion in foreign currency reserves. No doubt, one of the reasons why China holds such a huge reserve is to exercise political clout on the world stage. But there are other reasons as well. The Chinese have learnt from bitter experience that in times of financial crises they can not rely on international organisations to rescue them.

Who in East Asia does not remember the financial meltdown of 1997-98 and the role played by international organisations? With a fraction of its reserves, together with Japan and South Korea, it has set up the Chiang Mai Initiative Fund, which is giving currency stability to a number of East Asian nations. If anyone has any doubts about the role played by China as a responsible global partner in the financial world, just imagine what would have happened to the world financial system, if all of a sudden, China had decided to get rid of a big chunk of its dollar reserves?

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Where are we headed?

It is time for the nation to exhibit unity, fight obscurantist tendencies, and defeat all obstacles for a prosperous and progressive Bangladesh. The resilient nation has been through difficult and turbulent times before and will also steer out of the present haze which has eclipsed the country.

MD. MOZZAMMEL HAQUE

AFTER the government came to power, democracy experienced a worrisome deterioration. As a democratic developing country, it has been dealt a hard blow from the economic crisis. Spread across in every sector, Bangladesh occupies the world's political "middle ground." Because many issues receive significant attention from international leaders, the challenges its government faces raise serious questions about the prospects for fostering development, deepening democratic roots, and expanding effective governance.

The largest and broadest declines are in media freedom and civic engagement, both of which are intensely important for

citizens who want to hold their governments accountable. Both were affected not just by crude repression, although that certainly occurred in a number of contexts, but also by the arbitrary application of laws as well as the expansion of abuse to new forms of activism including to online activity and social media. There was regression among those who assessed due process rights and the protection of property rights. People have the right to know and the ability to justify their governments' daily work through electronic and print media. All people, whether educated or not, have the ability to judge right from wrong.

We actually seemed to see a widening in the gap between law and implementation this year. A number of countries have

increasingly sophisticated legal frameworks, but there have been problems in attempts to take what's in the books and apply it in practice.

Foreign investment is no substitute for domestic investment in education, the judicial system, and health and social welfare programs. An identical situation plays out today in other massive infrastructure projects and Western institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the case of the Chad-Cameroon Petroleum Development and Pipeline Project, the World Bank is acting as a watchdog to oversee the multinational project.

Women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming is vital for the political, economic, social and cultural growth of any country. Though this principle is recognised and acknowledged globally, women continue to be the victims of discriminatory practices, marginalisation and exclusion.

Rural women contribute to the economic, social and political growth of a society. They should have the right to participate in and benefit from rural development planning, implementation,

access to adequate health care facilities, social security programs, and access to formal and informal education. Empowerment allows rural women to form self-help groups, and get full access to agricultural credit, housing, sanitation, water supply, transport and communication. Legal empowerment of women accords "women equality with men before the law" -- this equality includes the freedom to conclude contracts, invalidating all legal instruments restricting women capacity, and the right to choose their residence and domicile etc.

Women are treated as second-class citizens in Bangladesh. They are highly marginalised, oppressed and violated. Their political, economic and social rights are infringed upon on a daily basis. The cases of domestic violence and discriminatory social practices are increasing. The existence and application of discriminatory legal instruments makes useless the women's right to legal emancipation. We should respect women and have zero tolerance against discrimination of women in every sphere of life.

In the enforcement of Muslim Family Law, women are again subjected to discrimination and exclusion. From early

teenage marriage, a half-share in inheritance, limitations in seeking unilateral divorce, discrepancies in child custody, the practice of polygamy and denial of alimony continue to jeopardise the interests and welfare of our society's women.

On the social front, women are again brutalised. They have to fit into their stereotyped role. Their births are greeted with concerns and worries. They are denied equal access to education opportunities in comparison with their male siblings. As wives, they are expected to engage fully in child bearing and rearing. Domestic violence cases, including rape, physical assault, and battery, go unnoticed. The despicable practices of honour killings and trade offs to settle blood feuds, and denying them their valid share in inheritance are some of the more flagrant infringements against women. It is time for the government, civil society and pressure groups to eliminate all forms of discriminatory practices against women.

It is time for the nation to exhibit unity, fight obscurantist tendencies, and defeat all obstacles for a prosperous and progressive Bangladesh. The resilient nation has been through difficult and turbulent times before and will also steer out of the

present haze which has eclipsed the country.

While the politicians and political parties try to outdo one another in their never-ending quest for power, our country's development efforts and its hard working citizens suffer.

The people as well as the government have to make sure that the opposition is doing exactly what it is alleged to do, without breaking any laws or violating the constitution.

Another way of looking at it, though, is that the constitution crosses certain taboos. On another level, it's really just, I think, one of the most concise and coherent political manifestos in recent years.

The same thing has been happening in this part of the world for 100 years. Sometimes I wonder, is it true that the present political situation arose out of our forefathers' mistakes, who made one after another without foreseeing the upcoming blow? We have to await the answer from the nation.

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