

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

Bangladesh: The Power of Media for Inclusive Growth

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“Not surprisingly, while India continued to experience famines under British rule right up to independence ...they disappeared suddenly with the establishment of a multiparty democracy and a free press.”

Amartya Sen, winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics, argues in his book *“Democracy as a Universal Value”* that democracy and a free press are tools for preventing famine in developing countries. To him, since a free press draws attention to the problem, a country is more unlikely to suffer poverty. And much more than that: free media are said to foster social inclusion, human rights and even economic development. Furthermore, independent media are indispensable for democracy, which is still widely regarded as the best system of government for a country that wants to achieve socio-economic development. Media are an arena in which free debates can be held between the government and the people. Such debates can force the government to be open, transparent and accountable to the citizenry and thus lower corruption.

Some may argue that China is an example of how countries can achieve rapid economic growth even though the country's limited number of media are under the government's control. China's economy has grown impressively in recent years, and it became the world's second largest economy very recently.

I would say the issue is slightly different. Economic growth might be possible without free media, but sustainable and inclusive growth certainly isn't. In China, for instance, a huge part of the population still suffers from poverty due to income inequality. This increases the risk of upheavals.

Bangladesh is a good example of how free media accompany a democratic transformation process and foster economic development.

Bangladesh's watchdog

Bangladesh's 15-year military rule started in 1975 and prevailed until 1990. Media organisations were controlled during this time, and Bangladesh was known for widespread corruption.

Since then, the situation has improved. With press freedom guaranteed by the constitution, many media in Bangladesh have become a place for independent debates on government policies. Most of the television channels, radio and newspapers along with civil society groups are highly critical of the government's economic policies and are successfully playing the role of watchdog and path-finder.

For instance, the government signed a deal with US company ConocoPhillips on gas exploration last year which granted the company ownership of 80 percent of the gas produced. A campaign group protested against the deal which sparked a huge debate in the media. Although the government stuck to its decision, the media debate may have pushed it to be more democratic in the decision-making process in future.

In 2009, Bangladesh even pushed its Right to Information Act (RTI) through the Parliament, ensuring the people's right to access information. The implementation of the law still remains a big challenge, though, since the mindset of the bureaucracy, an administrative legacy of British colonial rule, has changed little. Lack of sufficient infrastructure and awareness along with illiteracy limit the use of the RTI in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is now achieving over 6 percent GDP growth and remains largely unaffected by the global financial crisis. In the daily “Financial Express”, US officials have articulated the hope that Bangladesh could be an ideal spot for US investment and exports. I am sure that without the vibrant and booming media landscape in Bangladesh, the recent growth of the country's economy would not have been possible.

Fighting the digital divide

In the 21st century, the age of the digital revolution, information has become global. The internet provides information even in countries without widespread and free media coverage. Still some authoritarian governments nakedly try to control all media including the press. Typical examples include China and some Arab countries. But even for them, it is almost impossible to keep people from accessing information. As we saw, the social website Facebook played a very prominent role in the recent 'Arab Spring' which has been able to topple some enduring dictators.

But while the world hails the internet revolution, a very large number of people across the globe remain excluded from this tool. The term "digital divide" refers to the fact that access to internet technology is not available to everyone equally, due in large part to poverty and illiteracy. The wider the digital gap is, the lower the possibility for achieving inclusive growth becomes.

The government, development agencies and service operators can initiate efforts to bridge the digital gap. In Bangladesh, for example, the government has set a vision called "Digital Bangladesh". It wants to completely bridge the existing digital divide in the population by 2021.

It might not be too ambitious a goal, since most Bangladeshi youths adopt technology quite rapidly. If the government is sincere enough in their commitment, it could be quite possible. The role of mass media here could again be regarded as rather important in reminding the government of its commitments and putting continuous pressure on it to implement what it promised to people before the election.