



"Role of the Media on Democratic Ownership of the Development Finance System"

by

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Introduction

Failure to substantially reduce global poverty even after more than half century of development finance can be termed as a fundamental drawback of whole aid disbursement process since the end of the Second World War. Naturally it raises the question as to why global efforts have met with such limited success. Quest for an answer, though not new, is now being pursued with more intensity than ever before with the Millennium Development

Goals (MDGs) setting a definite time frame to achieve substantial reduction in poverty. While issues of quantum of development finance, the method of its disbursement and donor 'conditionalities' continue to be debated, a whole new set of reasons have been identified as necessary for enhancing effectiveness of development financing. The foremost among them is the question of "ownership" of the process of development finance and its accountability. Who owns the aid that follows into the recipient country? Is it the donors who provide the fund or is it the recipient countries, in whose name the aid is given. At the initial stage the answer of course was the donors. Well that answer had its own limitations because aid did not make the impact that the donors wanted it to. It has been found that aid recipient countries do not sufficiently take responsibility for effective use of aid as they see the process as mere continuation of the old dependency syndrome rather than a way for self-assertion and self-reliance. This feeling of helplessness is further increased by developing countries being unable to hold the donors accountable for effective use of aid that they receive.

Multilateral aid agencies, such as OECD among others, have been aware of this crucial "ownership" gap and hence renewed global effort to address this issue for increasing aid effectiveness. This meeting itself is, no doubt, one of the outcome of that effort.

Media and Effective Development Finance

Media, with its increasing reach, diverse forms and diffused ownership is more and more recognized as a potential ally of the growth process, especially in the developing countries. While earlier it was seen more as a publicity component of development projects, today many see it as an effective partner in the development process itself, both in the policy formulating stage as well as in the implementation stage.

This transformation in appreciating media's role come principally from the fact that effectiveness of development process comes from a sense of ownership of those who are the beneficiaries. That sense increases as the capacity of the latter to be informed, to question, to suggest, to challenge and to hold those responsible accountable increases. The more the recipient countries, especially their people, feel that they can perform the above tasks freely and effectively, without risking the ire of the donor countries, the more they feel the ownership of the development process. To bring about this "empowering" experience there is no better institution than the media.

For the media to play this "empowering" role it needs the following qualities:

a) It must have a commitment for social change in addition to making profit. This commitment must be shown in terms of allocations of both resources and staff to issues such as gender equality, poverty reduction, human rights, environment, rural uplift, etc. Very often media, both print and electronic, show an indifference to these issues as they do not attract advertisers and thus do not add to their balance sheet. Even if that be the case media owners will have to support the above causes if they want a better world to flourish in.

Here we need a new breed of new and visionary media owners who see their self interest in the distance rather than in the immediate. We can take comfort in the fact that such enlightened media owners are in the horizon. This is most dramatically evidenced by the fact that mainstream media now a days gives so much time to global warming, climate change and environment. It is my belief that the awareness that is bringing the global media to focus more on the environment, it will be that same awareness that will make them focus on poverty reduction. This is because the link between poverty and environment is today well established, so also the link between poverty and human security, with its natural impact upon national security itself.

b) Media professionals must remain above the political divide that exists in many developing countries. Such divides fragment professional bodies, such as doctors, lawyers, business community, etc leading to a lowering of professional ethics and replacing them with partisan loyalty. In many developing countries, including my own, professional bodies representing journalists get sucked into this divide at a huge cost in professionalism and credibility. Bangladesh provides a good case in point where such a division became so intense that for one group government could do wrong and for the other, nothing right

regardless of how responsible or otherwise it was. Given such partisan journalism the dip in credibility was inevitable with consequent loss of circulation.

Only those that tried to remain above the fray not only retained their circulation but also enhanced it dramatically, proving once more that media must always adhere to their professional ethics whatever the short term gain may offer.

c) Media needs to go for higher professional training and also higher knowledge of social, economic and environmental issues. There is a basic arrogance among the media professionals, at least as far as my experience goes, which makes them suffer from a "know all' mentality. This must be changed not because journalists are not well educated but because social, economic and environmental issues have become far more complex and needs greater and deeper understanding than ever before. Examining WTO issues should suffice to drive home the point that without thorough knowledge of its intricacies, which has serious social and economic consequences, resulting no doubt in grave social, economic and environmental impact, no journalist can even begin to scratch even the surface of the impact of Doha Round of negotiations. Similar is the case for Kyoto Protocols and others.

d) Media professionals must be morally and ethically well armed.

There can be no credibility in fighting corruption or upholding human rights and other laudable causes if journalists do not enjoy high degree of public trust. This trust can only be gained by being above question in every way, especially financial dealings.

The above conditions can be termed as internal to the media for their effective role in ensuring greater use of development financing. There are however external conditions that must also prevail for the process to succeed.

Simultaneous to a strong media there must exist the following effectively functioning institutions.

First and foremost there must be an effective parliament with all their committees operating regularly. Second, there must exist a powerful and independent national accountability structure in the form of auditing mechanism like an Accountant General and Comptroller's (AG's) office or some similar

institution to ensure the financial accountability of the government for both its revenue and development budgets. In most of the developing countries government remains the biggest spender and doer. This is probably true even for developed countries. To be able to ensure strict accountability of government expenditure is perhaps the single most important measure that a country can take to ensure proper use of its resources, which are often meager, and of course stems corruption and waste. This one measure will result into a quantum leap in terms of good governance and proper use of domestic resources and development financing. I cannot over-emphasize the point of financial discipline with transparent accountability to strengthen the idea of "ownership" on the development financing process.

To make the process effective each ministry should have its respective high powered and independent auditing mechanism that will directly report to the national body or even to the parliament. I think good examples are galore for the developing countries to choose from. Tax collection remains a major challenge for developing countries. The tax net is small and there is tremendous waste and corruption in the process, often involving officials themselves. Capacity building here would be of tremendous relevance. A powerful and independent National Anti-corruption Commission is of central importance to the whole process of "ownership" When the general public will see the politically powerful and the rich going to jail for corruption then they will regain their trust and confidence on the legal process and the rule of law. Over the years this public faith on the legal system, especially its capacity to move against the rich and the powerful was greatly corroded and as such there existed an all pervasive "culture of Impunity". We can say without much fear of contradiction that as long as there exists a "culture of impunity" the development financing process will always be clouded with doubt and suspicion and no "ownership" of the development process can be expected. Setting up a National Human Rights Commission will greatly strengthen the feeling of confidence about individual

and collective rights and people will have greater confidence in raising unpopular and unpleasant questions. The faster such a commission be set up the quicker we can move towards "Ownership" of the development process.

Finally decentralization of the administrative system will add tremendous impetus to the process of "ownership". Many developing countries like Bangladesh severely suffers from the over centralization of governance process and a vacuum of power and authority at the lower tiers of administration. De-centralisation and devolution of power to the local levels can be termed as major pillars to the acceptance of "ownership" of the development process. If such a devolution of power can be achieved then automatically a new "demand driven" development process will have to operate, in place of the "supply driven" process that now operates. It is my experience that anytime people at the grass roots level have been given power and responsibility to determine their development goals and policies there has been a magical change in their enthusiasm and support, and hence the "ownership" of the process of change that took place.

Two examples from Bangladesh:

a) BBC's Bangladesh Sanglap.

Sanglap is a Bangla word meaning "Dialogue". The BBC launched a series of dialogue with citizens on a number of very important political, economic and social issues to solicit public views on them and also to give people a chance to have a say in order to influence policy formulation. The format of the "Sanglap" was to have a panel of four speakers, one from the government (usually a minister), one from the opposition (former minister), an expert on the subject being discussed and one eminent citizen coming from other professions, including journalists. The questions would usually emanate from the public, which usually the minister normally had to answer with other panelists giving

their views. The audience would consist of ordinary people, students, professionals, media, etc. Held in three phases (3rd continuing), till today a total 48 "Sanglaps" have been held covering general topics such as education, corruption, governance, health, local government, security, trade and justice. About 87 percent of them have been held in urban metros with 11 per cent being in small towns and a mere 6 per cent in villages. In the case of Bangladesh this spread however urban biased is quite impressive as serious efforts have been made to go out of the capital city is evident here, which is not often the case. According to BBC sources a 192 panelists (including ministers, senior politicians, present and former caretaker government advisors, civil society members, senior retired army officials, former bureaucrats, leading business leaders, editors, academics, lawyers, rights activists, cultural personalities) have participated in their 48 Sanglaps starting from August 2005 till date. Nearly 5000 people attended the Sanglap, with 57 per cent being male and 43 per cent female. BBC partnered with a local private TV channel and national radio. It was directly broadcast on the BBC FM programme carried on national radio. A one hour edited version was shown on TV on pre-announced days later.

The BBC Sanglap was, perhaps, initiated (in August 2005) a year and half before the scheduled elections in January 2007 with the idea of raising important policy issues prior to the election and through a process of widespread open public debate create public "ownership" for a host of demands that political parties may find to their interest to include in their respective party manifestos. It was a well conceived, meticulously planned and effective mechanism of soliciting public views and ensuring public participation in discussing crucial policy issues. In a culture where politicians are not used to facing public questioning in an open and democratic manner, it was indeed a unique experience. Suddenly voters were made to feel that they were important, that they had things to say, and most importantly they could hold their leaders accountable on a personal level. It was a great "empowering" feeling, that no

doubt helped in enhancing the self esteem and confidence of the voters.

b) National Dialogue and "Vision Paper" of Citizen's Committee organized by Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, and Channel I.

Two newspapers, one Bangla and one English, one TV channel and a think tank, together created something unprecedented in Bangladesh. By organizing country-wide dialogue at district towns with very eminent people of the locality, especially the non-partisan highly esteemed professionals and civil society members and traders and representation from professional groups and students This set of 15 day-long dialogues were exercise in public accountability of the politicians. The over-arching title of the dialogue was "The Role of Civil Society in ensuring accountable Development Process". Under this rubric we had specialized sessions such as on education, health, transport, trade, politics, parliament, political parties, etc. A total of 7,000 prominent citizens participated in the dialogue with 1,300 being actively involved. In each of the district twons that the "Dialogues" were held, we partnered with local organizations of intellectuals, traders, students, artists, singers, consumers, transport owners, workers, etc.

Modeled like open public hearings people were asked to give their views on the current problems and identify what they wanted to be included in the next election manifestos of the leading political parties. They also spoke on what they thought was the wrong actions of the incumbent government and the policy errors that they made. Though similar to the BBC Sanglap these district level dialogues were much bigger events and became more substantive since they were day long events and more and more people could speak in them. Most importantly it produced a set of specific recommendations with the ensuring election in view. These recommendations REFORMS consisted of the following areas:

1. Election Commission
2. Conduct of the National Election and related matters
3. Role of the Members of Parliament
4. Election Manifesto of the Political Parties
5. Political reforms
6. Representation of Women in Parliament
7. Fighting Corruption and role of related bodies

This district level dialogue process ended with a huge national event with important political and other personalities being present. On this occasion the organizers of the dialogue handed over to the two main political parties a wide ranging set of recommendations aimed at influencing the preparation of their respective party election platforms. This was the first ever articulation of policy options by the people produced through a democratic and open dialogue process. This exercise was highly appreciated by the public and people began to acknowledge that they now had non partisan platforms from which to articulate their concerns and national media and think tanks would assist them in spreading their message and also in preparing them in an organized form. The two above examples have powerful messages for others as to how to mobilize public opinion behind issues and concerns and give them public voice. This exercise in public debate enhanced people attachment to democracy.

Conclusion

Good governance is the only way for ensuring significant reduction of poverty. Ensuring good governance requires an openness in running the affairs of the country that has so far not been the case in most developing countries. This openness includes the process of development financing. The question of ownership is directly linked to access to knowledge of the stakeholders about the whole budgetary mechanism through which public money is spent.

Transparency and accountability of how public money is spent is at the heart of reducing poverty and ensuring good governance. It not only ensures prevention

of waste, in generates a mentality of accountability that makes development finances far more effective than ever before. The suggestions for follow up steps would be the following:

1. Support all existing efforts and create new ones for the demand for a Right to Information Act in every developing country. One such Act will result in a quantum leap in the direction of accountability and transparency in every country. However passing an Act is only the first step. There will have to be a support structure to help implement it. Implementation of such an Act is a formidable task as persons and institutions not used to being either open or accountable find it exceedingly hard to adapt to such practices.

2. Strengthening of all financial and performance auditing institutions of the country, especially those attached to the government. Auditing must be made swift, efficient and quick. It should not be meant for harassing but for preventing waste and corruption. The auditing should not only include accounts of how money is spent but also look at the cost of that expenditure and also whether it has been most cost effective or not.

3. All public servants and all elected statutory post holders must disclose their assets prior to taking office and continue to do so annually throughout their tenure.

4. Development financing should have full disclosure clause and condition of disbursement. There should be disclosure at project formulation level, at the awarding level and finally at every stage of implementing level. All expenditure connected with this should be on a website which is constantly updated.

5. Media should be especially encouraged to report on specific projects and all assistance extended to it while it is being reported on.

Thank You.