Human development and its discontents

BOOK REVIEW

ISHAN BAKSHI

At the turn of the millennium, 189 countries adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) – a set of eight universally applicable goals – with a promise to attain them by 2015.

The agenda was undoubtedly ambitious, dwarfing previous attempts to place human development at the forefront of the global economic agenda. But despite the audacious endeavour, the MDGs had their fair share of criticism. Goals, as some argued, were not sufficiently tuned to the ground realities of countries and failed to account for differences across countries. The process too was criticised for lacking legitimacy. Inputs from civil society and developing countries was not given due consideration, leading to a lack of ownership.

Fifteen years later, it would be fair to say that progress on achieving the goals has been mixed; some countries have made significant strides, others have fared poorly.

Now with the 2015 deadline upon us, *Human Development in the Global South: Emerging perspectives in the Era of Post-Millennium Development Goals* attempts to bring voices from the southern countries to the forefront, hoping to make them equal stakeholders in the global debate.

The book, which draws on the experience of countries such as India, China, Bangladesh, Nepal and Brazil, is divided into six parts covering critical issues such as eradicating poverty, providing social protection, ensuring food security, enhancing education and employment opportunities and providing universal healthcare coverage.

A big omission – one that, frankly, permeates the development discourse – is the failure to acknowledge the role of one instrumental variable in raising living standards: growth. Barring a few references, the impact of achieving and sustaining high growth on human development is barely acknowledged. It is almost as if high growth is a secondary objective.

Nagesh Kumar, for instance, says evidence suggests that most countries saw a faster reduction in poverty after the MDGs were introduced. One could argue that the articulation of a global development agenda and its continuous monitoring does put pressure on governments to step up efforts to improve their development indicators.

This line of thinking fails to acknowledge that significant progress on achieving these targets was made largely because global growth was on steroids during this period. In fact, the sharpest reduction in poverty achieved in modern history occurred during this high growth phase. It is this high growth that provided governments with the resources to fund the massive welfare programmes.

On food security, Mehendra Dev, who comes across as sympathetic to the National Food Security Act, argues that there is a policy bias towards wheat and rice in India which marginalised pulse production. This is a valid point but it begs the question: how is one to fulfil commitments under the NFSA and engineer a shift towards greater pulse production at the same time? Further, while Mr Dev argues, rightly, that India suffers severe nutrition deficiency, the NFSA actually does precious little to solve this issue.

Another argument in the book that resonates widely in the public discourse, is that the Indian government spends far less on social sectors schemes than other countries. Many have vociferously argued in favour of raising social sector spending significantly. But this argument is flawed at many levels.

First, it would be more appropriate to compare countries at similar levels of per capita income rather than compare India to Brazil, China or Scandinavia. Second, this argument fails to account for the state's capacity to actually deliver these services effectively.

Surveys have repeatedly shown that the poor even in rural areas are increasingly opting for private education and health care facilities. Thus, simply flushing down more money is unlikely to improve outcomes unless one can ensure a rise in the quality of service provided. In this regard, Geeta Kingdon makes an interesting suggestion. Ms Kingdon calls for setting a quality goal to measure the cognitive skills of a whole age cohort. This is important to track student and teacher attendance rates and teachers' competence levels. Measuring them should enable developing countries to monitor the intermediate steps and building blocks for achieving school completion and learning goals. But the capacity of the state to implement this is questionable.

As India is struggling to deliver quality services it would be prudent to examine how other countries, especially those at lower levels of per capita income, have successfully delivered high quality health and education services.

Bangladesh offers an interesting example. M Hafizur Rahman and Tashrik Ahmed argue that the country has been able to make significant progress because of an assorted collection of actors who create and manage health services. Health actors, they argue, have taken a *laissez faire* approach to drive social entrepreneurship — the creation of innovative solutions to social problems.

But talk of allowing private providers in health care or education to deal with issues of quality and last mile connectivity in India is blasphemous. It's a pity we don't learn from others.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Tanuka Endow, Sumit Mazumdar, Mitu Sengupta (editors)

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