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A Panel Discussion

DEVELOPMENT AS SEEN BY POLICY-MAKERS, PRACTITIONERS AND THE PUBLIC

Panelists: Dr. K.S. Sandhu
Dr. Nihal Kappagoda
Professor Syed Hussein Alatas
Mr. Rosihan Anwar

Dr. K.S. Sandhu, as moderator, said that the discussion was based on the assumption that there was general agreement among participants that development was a necessary process and that everyone subscribed to it. There might be differences of opinion on how development should be carried out, and how things should be done. It was also possible that development viewed from different perspectives might seem different to those at the receiving end and to those implementing it. However, what ought to be done was to investigate the phenomenon of development, to raise questions, doubts, make comments and share views so that through discussion participants could get the right perspective on development.

Dr. Nihal Kappagoda, basing his comments on the experiences he had gained in the field of development planning at the Ministry of Planning in Sri Lanka, said that many of the present day planners had been brought up in the traditional western theories of economic planning. They were made to believe that economic growth could be increased and its benefits could be distributed to each and everyone in a country.

They were in fact concerned about increasing the overall rate of economic growth in the expectation that increases in overall income would seep down to the people at grassroot level. This was the thinking behind the targets set for the United Nations Development Decade in the 1970's, where it was postulated that an acceptable growth rate for developing countries would be around five per cent. As it happened, many countries did exceed this target, but at the end of the decade it was found that although high rates of growth had been achieved, yet many of the basic problems remained. For instance, FAO estimated that by the end of 1970, half the world was suffering from hunger or nutritional deficiency, infant mortality remained high, life expectancy remained low. A man in the West could expect to live 40 per cent longer than an average man in the developing countries, and twice as long as an average man in Africa.

Illiteracy still remained widespread. There were many million more illiterates today than there were 20 years ago, bringing the total number of illiterates today to around 800 million. More importantly, it was found that unemployment was endemic and growing and estimates showed that nearly 20 per cent of the world was unemployed.
and population in urban areas was growing twice as fast as the number of jobs available there. There had been increasing disparities in the distribution of income. From statistics available for the developing countries, on an average, the upper 20 per cent of income earners received 55 per cent of the national income, whereas the lower 20 per cent received only five per cent.

Robert McNamara, President of the World Bank had rightly pointed out at a conference held in 1970 to discuss the Lester Pearson Report on Foreign Aid that the traditional indicator of wellbeing, namely that of economic growth, was not at all adequate to fully represent the development of a people. What should be done therefore was to look for other development indicators, which went beyond the mere measurement of growth in output and which would enable us to measure social changes and other dimensions in the whole process of modernisation that a society was trying to achieve.

As a matter of fact, a few years later, a plea was made once again at the annual meeting of the World Bank, pressing for a meaningful measure of economic performance which would give equal weightage to effecting ten per cent increase in the income of the poor as against ten per cent increase in the income of the higher income group. It was meant to reallocate resources to enable the social factors to be taken into account. It was really a new turn that planners began to talk about social justice and what it implied and they took a look at the social indicators. Thus, there really was a shift in the planning process emphasising social factors rather than simple economic growth.

Dr. Kappagoda, however, cautioned that perhaps one should not go to the other extreme. He quoted an example from Sri Lanka, where since the end of the Second World War, liberal social welfare policies were pursued, such as extensive free health services, free education, subsidised public transportation, subsidised food and recently a certain quantity of rice given free to the people. All this helped reduce the inequality in income that existed, but it also impeded the overall growth rate and led to a social upheaval in 1971. Both approaches — one viewing economic concentration and growth as the sole objective of development, the other regarding redistribution of wealth as the primary objective — were in fact inadequate if one of the two was to be chosen as development policy. What planners should do is to look for policies that would enable a nation to do both — achieve a measure of redistribution while achieving economic growth.

How should a strategy be mapped out to achieve economic growth while planning for the welfare of the people? Dr. Kappagoda suggested that the solution lay in emphasising the agricultural sector when planning a nation's growth so as to achieve maximum output from this sector. In most Asian countries, at least 30 to 40 per cent of the gross national product was contributed by agriculture. For the foreseeable future, this sector would continue to provide the avenues of employment to a large number of young people entering the labour market.

The agricultural sector makes up 32 per cent of the gross national product in the Philippines, 31 per cent in Malaysia, 30 per cent in Thailand, 44 per cent in Indonesia, 48 per cent in India, 35 per cent in Sri Lanka and 31 per cent in South Korea.
He also outlined some of the problems facing the agricultural sector in Asia. For instance, farm holdings were fragmented. The wealthy owned large areas of the land. Unless land reforms were introduced, any type of plan that might be introduced would not improve upon what could be achieved now. There were also other problems like the introduction of high yielding varieties of seed, farmers' inability to obtain credit facilities and other inputs required for adoption of modern farming methods. He drew attention to a tendency among the big farmers to use farm machinery instead of employing the poor peasants who were available for work and suggested that a wide range of policies be introduced to maximise the potential output in this sector.

Dr. Kappagoda pointed out that the process of planning starting with the villages and leading up to the centre, with emphasis on social factors rather than on an overall economic growth needed the support, involvement and participation of the people. It was in this area, making the people aware of their problems and the need for them to participate in development process that the mass media had a clear role to play.

Professor Syed Hussein Alatas viewed the problems of development and mass media's role in development from a different angle. He said that one of the most serious problems in Asia today was the absence of a high public morality — a lack of public will to resist corruption and apathy among a nation's elite which, in his view, formed the biggest obstacles to development in Asia. "Asian societies do not develop a very strong moral attitude. Without this attitude, we can never hope to develop, because development is essentially a moral factor".

He said that mass media had failed to agitate for progressive values. They had confined themselves to churning out cheap sensational reporting and a load of information often irrelevant and meaningless to the public. He added that the responsibility of re-directing media's role rested more with the management of media organisations than with the journalistists themselves. "If we don't use the mass media to encourage positive values of development, we are in for a great deal of trouble, because there are far too many negating factors to development".

Mr. Rosihan Anwar viewed development from the viewpoint of journalists. He outlined some of the problems facing development as a) social inertia, slowness to accept changes; b) corruption; c) administrative inefficiency; d) social, linguistic and class barriers; e) traditional conservatism.

In an attempt to identify the role of the press in development, Mr. Anwar delineated some of the problems the media organisations encountered in countries where there were stricter government controls over media operations but noted that press freedom should be exercised with integrity and competence. He emphasised the need for media practitioners to study in depth problems or developments which they chose to analyse, interpret and comment on.

He also stressed that apart from concentrating on problems connected with agriculture, industries, national integration, nation building, social justice, etc., attention
should also be paid to the problems of youth. Their problems should form an integral part of any 'development thinking' and youth should be given hope of having a better life in future. Media practitioners should not only be communicators of development information but of hope in the validity and effectiveness of the programmes.

The participants raised many questions most of which were fundamental in nature: can a nation effectively launch development programmes where the government is indifferent or where there is no social justice at all, or where there is an incompetent local administration and where there is no system of popular education? Should we set our own pace of development based on resources available or should we adopt western standards? What policies should be adopted in the spheres of popular participation – do the people remain as willing participants at the receiving end or should they be given opportunities at the decision making level and how?

What policies and attitudes should developing countries adopt towards foreign aid? What makes a nation modern? Is development synonymous with modernity? How can the media play an important role in development when most policy-makers prefer to keep them on the sidelines of national activity? Who decides what is good for the people – the government or the media or both? How can media bridge the credibility gap that has been created between the policy-makers and themselves? Do the media continue to operate in a mood of pessimism or are there reasons and signs for optimism?

What are the difficulties that confront media practitioners and prevent them from contributing their share to developmental goals? What is the level of expertise required of media practitioners to interpret development plans and projects? What is the size and nature of communication input in development?

The questions were indeed far-ranging, and most of them defied cut and dried answers and ready-made recipes. In a region like Asia with vastly varied cultural and political ethos, priorities and urgencies, sensitivities and receptivities, each country had to solve its problems in its own way. The questions, however, brought to light an awareness that there were far more problems than could possibly be tackled in the near future. But there were encouraging signs that more policy-makers, planners, administrators and communicators were concerned and involved in mobilising the people for development than there were ten years ago.

The participants felt that there should be more discussion where problems could be brought to the surface. In their view, what was more urgent was an awareness of problems of development.