Development billboards: Numbers do not lie, or do they?

December 10, 2013

The ruling party sponsored billboards are back. This time they are bigger, better, and lawfully erected, loaded with information, and visible throughout Dhaka city. Many provide development statistics from current and previous regimes of the incumbent government, at times also including figures from BNP’s last term. Apparently they highlight Bangladesh’s exceptional progress in human development and attribute this to the incumbent government.

Bangladesh’s achievements in certain social development statistics has been the focus of numerous international media reports and academic analyses. Over the last five years, the country featured as a prominent case study in many influential international publications such as the Human Development Report, the Economist, the World Development Report and the Lancet. In an election year, the ruling party has rightly capitalised on positive global coverage of the country’s development records. However, what most media stories and reports do not mention is the time path of our social progress. The billboard numbers do not lie. But, they only tell you the half-truth and conveniently bypass areas where our fate has changed very little.

Bangladesh emerged as a regional leader in some indicators decades before the billboards were put up. Take for instance the case of female schooling. Bangladesh became well known as something of a success in removing gender disparity in school enrolment rates since the 1990s. This has been true for both primary and secondary education. Many of
our key achievements in health also date back to the 1990s. According to the influential Lancet series on Bangladesh’s health progress published last month, the coverage of child immunisation programme increased from 59% in 1993–94 to nearly 82% in 2007. At the same time, the biggest jump occurred between 1986 and 1993 considering that coverage was at little as 2% in 1986.

No wonder, Bangladesh’s progress came under careful statistical scrutiny as early as the 1990s. Researchers from the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) arguably made the earliest attempt to assess the country’s progress in the first 25 years since independence by comparing performance to other countries of similar income level. Conducted in 1997, the research examined indicators such as expected life expectancy, adult illiteracy, total fertility rate (TFR), and contraceptive prevalence rate in the early 1990s. The key findings were that Bangladesh performed better compared to its income-predicted values for TFR and contraceptive prevalence rate. Few years later in 2006, BIDS re-examined Bangladesh’s progress over the period 1970-2000 and confirmed performance improvement in population growth rate, contraceptive prevalence rate, infant mortality, and life expectancy even by the late 1990s.

More updated analysis of Bangladesh’s performance since independence shows that we managed to reverse our initially poor record in terms of excessive infant deaths per thousand and child deaths per thousand by mid 1990s — compared to other countries of similar income level, excess mortality disappeared. This does not mean that further progress did not occur in post-1995 period. Indeed there was also a sharp decline in child mortality in post-1995 period.

Overall, the existing research points out that much of what we see in Bangladesh has been happening for quite some time. Timings of the gains for different development indicators have overlapped with different political regimes (see [http://www.bwpi.manchester.ac.uk/resources/Working-Papers/bwpi-wp-18913.pdf]). There is very little to suggest in the data that BNP or AL enjoyed greater success over one another in advancing the country’s social development agenda. Bangladesh’s story received wider coverage in the international media in recent years. This in turn creates the illusion that Bangladesh has suddenly become a shining example for many other poor countries desperately trying to break out of the under-development trap. Perhaps this led some commentators to controversially conclude that when taking into account the country’s human development progress, the incumbent government out-performed the BNP (e.g. recent op-ed in the New York Times by Bangladeshi writer Tahmina Anam).

Instead of singling out a particular political regime, the recent Lancet series on Bangladesh rightly attributes the progress achieved to a pluralistic system involving many stakeholders. Irrespective of the party in power, the government was allowed to form partnership with NGOs and external donors. Both BNP and Awami League avoided the destructive strategy of discontinuing projects that was initiated during the previous government’s regime. Presence of a vibrant media and civil society groups also helped. Such policy consensus in social development highlights what would have been achieved if we had political agreements in other areas such as large infrastructure development, economic governance and private sector development.

For BNP and AL, the biggest challenge to winning votes today lies in not taking a visible stand against corruption. When in power, both politicized key public institutions and encouraged corruption affecting the banking sector, the capital market and functioning of the executive branch. In terms of their respective governance records, there is little to choose. Instead of playing billboard number games, political parties must organize their election time campaign by around an agenda of good governance. After Hallmark, Destiny, and the stock market episodes, simply juggling statistics will not buy votes.

Niaz Asadullah is a Professor in the Faculty of Economics and Administration at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

Like

Tags: Awami League, Bangladesh, Billboard, Development, Economic prosperity

This entry was posted on December 10, 2013 at 8:23 pm and is filed under AL/BNP/Jamaat, Politics. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed.

WARNING: Any unauthorised use or reproduction of bdnews24.com content for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited and constitutes copyright infringement liable to legal action.
7 Responses to “Development billboards: Numbers do not lie, or do they?”

1. samiul on December 11, 2013 at 6:47 am
   Very true. Number crunching will not make people forget about the massive looting through share market and banks. I understand that it is safe not to mention judiciary. I at least give credit to both bnp and BAL for continuing good projects. Thanks for redirecting focus to right direction.

2. NN on December 10, 2013 at 9:58 pm
   Who is paying for the billboards?

3. Bichhu on December 10, 2013 at 9:54 pm
   Billboards are meaningless if no development work is done.

4. Mainul Alam on December 10, 2013 at 9:44 pm
   True the development and prosperity is a long term process, it’s not an overnight phenommenon. But the ruling party did work hard for the prosperity. And why shouldn’t publicize their feat in the billboards? Every other country does so during election. My only observation is the billboards could have aesthetically better.

5. Ritu on December 10, 2013 at 9:41 pm
   Bangladesh is yet to learn how to do positive publicity.

6. Khaleque on December 10, 2013 at 9:40 pm
   Billboard will not get votes, sincere work will.

7. Golam Arshad on December 10, 2013 at 9:28 pm
   The SPIN OF FAILURE will never clinch the Mandate of the people. Blood, Violence hallmarked vengeance and vendetta. Will PEACE be thrown into the nire of violent confrontation. BAL BNP and Jamaat in “People’s Dock”!

Leave a Reply

Name (required)

Mail (will not be published) (required)

Website
Development billboards: Numbers do not lie, or do they? | Opinion

Development billboards: Numbers do not lie, or do they? | Opinion

Development billboards: Numbers do not lie, or do they? | Opinion

http://opinion.bdnews24.com/2013/12/10/development-billboards-numbers-do-not-lie-or-...
Development billboards: Numbers do not lie, or do they?

http://opinion.bdnews24.com/2013/12/10/development-billboards-numbers-do-not-lie-or-...