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THIRD WORLD

Putting a head count on poverty

DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES SOMETIMES EXAGGERATE – AND FABRICATE – THE STATISTICS TO PROMOTE THEIR WORTHY CAUSES. AS WITH WAR, TRUTH CAN BE THE FIRST CASUALTY OF AID.

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FOR nearly five years, the United Nations Children's Fund has trumpeted India as a success story in the UN's global campaign to vaccinate all children against common diseases. Because dozens of developing countries have, like India, achieved the goal of immunizing 80 per cent of their children, Unicef recently declared the program "one of the greatest achievements of the 1990s to date."

Shortly before the United Nations agency made its success known in its annual State of the World's Children report, however, India's less-publicized National Family Health Survey came to very different conclusions. In India's biggest states, which account for more than half of the population of 900 million, barely half of the children had been immunized against such basic diseases as measles and polio. Nationally, the immunization level was less than 65 per cent. As a result, Unicef next year will quitely have to downgrade India from an outright success to a foot-dragging laggard.

This is not the first instance of statistical backtracking in India by the aid agency. A recent Unicef report suggested that diarrhea is killing 700,000 people a year – not the 1.5 million the agency had been telling the world for the past decade.

Statistical errors like this are not confined to India or to Unicef. Some relief and development organizations, whether they're dealing with high-profile disasters or simmering human crises, have long exaggerated – and in some cases outright fabricated – the numbers to suit their causes. Indeed, much of the statistical picture of the Third World that aid agencies present to the First World is little more than a guess, a picture sketched with runny colours. As with war, it seems, truth can be the first casualty of aid.

While many agencies argue that the ends justify the means, some development analysts see a dangerous trend. The UN's use of flimsy data "is nothing short of scandalous," says T. N. Srinivasan, a development economist at Yale University. "The compulsion to publish numbers that purport to be actual observations for a given year and country, while in fact they are at best projections, appears to have won over a sober assessment of the quality of the underlying data."

To be sure, measuring progress and failure is one of development's trickiest challenges. In the world's poorest countries, even such straightforward measures as gross national product are rendered irrelevant by massive underground economies that often account for the bulk of a nation's output.

Even a population census – the basic head count that is as old a government itself – is unavailable in many countries. According to the UN Population Fund, 22 of the world's 180 less-developed countries have not held a census since 1975. Seven of those nations have never even held a census.

The extent of the AIDS problem in the developing world is another area of statistical uncertainty. In India, for example, the health ministry says as many as five million Indians will be infected with HIV by 2000, and the cases of full-blown AIDS could reach one million. However, in 1992 the ministry predicted 60,000 cases within three years. So far, only 885 cases have been confirmed.

In its 1995 State of the World's Children report, Unicef admits it works with "imperfect statistics." It says progress in child development "requires up-to-date and reasonably accurate social statistics. The fact that such statistics are very rarely available is one of the central weaknesses of current social-development efforts." It then fills 85 pages with numbers, numbers and more numbers.

The house of statistical cards that many agencies try to build, perhaps to gain attention, is more than a media gimmick. It sways policy makers to support decisions and investments on the weakest grounds.

At the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo last September, major policy decisions on access to safe abortion were promoted on the frightening revelation that 500,000 women die every year during pregnancy or childbirth. One problem: No one seems to know where the number came from. In India, the health ministry says there are 130,000 maternal deaths a year, roughly one quarter of the UN total, although no proper survey of the problem has been conducted. "The number comes from someone's head," says a UN official.

Similar data are also often shamefully weak – at least partially because government budgets and many aid allocations are often determined on how bad the problem is. With such incentives, the Indian government has made the remarkable claim that malnutrition in India is twice as prevalent as it is in Ethiopia.

It works the other way, too. The Indian government has claimed that 84 per cent of the country's girls are enrolled in primary school, a preposterous suggestion to anyone who has visited a village in northern India. The government relies on enrolment figures from the first day of school, the only day of class that many children attend. As one aid official observes, more enrolled students mean the district is likley to get more teachers and school buildings. "No one believes these numbers," says an aid official in New Delhi.

If the data are not wrong, they can be hopelessly out of date. In sub-Saharan Africa, good social-development surveys have not been conducted since 1983 in 14 countries. In Cambodia, the UN relies on data from 1978. In Argentina, it employs statistics from 1982. In Haiti, it used numbers from 1984. "It's a major, major problem, trying to plan for 1995 with 1987 data," a UN official says. "It's very sad."

To understand this trend, many students of modern development point to Robert McNamara's tenure as president of the World Bank in the 1970s. As U.S. defence secretary, he applied quantitative analysis to the Vietnam War – his "body count" studies became a scourge to the anti-war movement. As president of the World Bank, he decided development agencies also needed to adopt a more scientific approach to their work. Soon, Mr. McNamara's World Bank was justifying its investments by, in effect, counting poverty.

But is was James Grant, Unicef's current executive director, who turned development data into a marketing tool. Since the eighties, Mr. Grant has turned Unicef reports into catalogues of poverty.

As other government agencies followed suit, Unicef also mastered the art of the quickfix, a remedy that could be presented as simply as the problem. The result was a phenomenon known as "targetitis": immunization of 80 per cent of the world's children, a halving of maternal mortality rates, a one-third reduction in child mortality.

And if the problem can be packaged as numbers, so can solutions. Each of the quick fixes is said to involve the expenditure of very little money.

For example, vaccination is said to cost pennies a child, but that doesn't reflect the entire health-care delivery systems that have to be built or revamped to meet the target. Nor does it reflect the difficulties in develop-

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ing these cheap fixes: cultural barriers, stigmas and other disincentives that underlie poverty.

So why do big development agencies continue to promote wrong statistics and misleading images of Third World problems?

The most common response is that no better data are available, and until they are, the cause justifies the means. "If we're using it [faulty numbers] for the advocacy of children, so what?" says L.N. Balaji, chief of research in Unicef's New Delhi office.

Another motive may be self-interest. For the big UN agencies and the World Bank, annual development reports, chock-full of seemingly authoritative data, are key fundraising tools. In its 1994 Human Development Report, the UN Development Program called on the world to channel some of the $933-billion (U.S.) peace dividend accumulated since 1987 toward human development. It seemed like a noble request, but where did the figure come from? Using official data, Jasjit Singh, director of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis in New Delhi, calculated the peace dividend to be closer to $250-billion (U.S.).

Even when the numbers are accurate, their simplification may serve to reinforce stereotypes. In a speech in 1993, Peter Adamson, the author of several Unicef reports, said such analyses often make people in the developing world "look stupid."

"By the way in which we say that solutions are simplistic and inexpensive, that dramatic differences can be made by just a few cents from the public, we imply that we have the know-how and the technique to solve their problems by the simplest of means, and that the people of the developing world know almost nothing."

More disturbing to some analysts is the very treatment of poverty as a quantitative science in which the subjects become the objects of development. In a new book, *The Experience of Poverty*, Tony Beck, a South Asia specialist at the University of British Columbia, argues that the world's development elite has not only reduced the world's poor to a statistic, but has also defined that statistic.

Take the case of a well-educated planner in Katmandu, the capital of Nepal. He might consider elementary education to be an important, even essential, element of development. Women in rural Nepal, on the other hand, might place greater emphasis on access to community forests because they need firewood for cooking. Yet if those women have access to a sustainable forest but lack access to a government school, a survey might call them poor.

Mr. Beck writes that such constructs of poverty tend to view 'the poor as passive objects of state planning.' Villagers are no longer asked if they are hungry. They are asked what foods they eat, and the results are plugged into a caloric formula that tells the surveyor whether the respondent should be hungry.

'The preoccupation with measurement,' Mr. Beck writes, 'fits well into a system where policy is created by a centralized state and then imposed on the poor 'from above' in order to shunt the poor above the poverty line. One might and should ask what part the poor themselves have in this process, and why their experience should be ignored in debates on poverty.'

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After spending more than 2½ years in Bengali villages in the eighties, Mr. Beck believes rural populations actually fear people in positions of power more than poverty itself. Despite many of the images put forward by aid agencies, most of these poor know how to get food and shelter, and how to teach their children the basics of rural life. The threats of police raping their daughters, of local authorities stealing their crops, of landlords demanding more money: These are the real grinds of rural life. "Powerlessness," Mr. Beck says, "remains the most pressing of problems."

Perhaps one reason powerlessness does not appear in development surveys is that it is a tough sell. It's easy to show a picture of a girl out of school or a boy with polio. It's tougher to convey the meaning of a picture of a landlord in rural Pakistan sipping tea with his brother, the local member of Parliament.

Gradually, however, some development agencies are cutting to the root causes of poverty. In its 1995 State of the World's Children report, Unicef points to "falling commodity prices, rising military spending, poor returns on investiment, the debt crisis and structural adjustment programs" for cutting real incomes in much of the developing world over the past decade.

But the report does not stop there. It says these factors have hurt "approximately 800 million people in 40 countries."

If only poverty were so simple.

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