

## Growth minus development

In rapid-fire, the country was recently hit by three global rankings. The first was the ease of doing business and India improved its global rank, according to the Brettenwoods experts. Now this is happiness. As an economist I believe the turnaround to the higher growth path will come if we do a bit of pump priming and then private investment will be sucked in. While some sarkari economists agree with me, this is still not the dominant view. So improving the ease of doing business is obviously good news. Of the three rankings this was the only one the chambers of commerce and corporate honchos went ga ga over. The Purchasing Managers' Index improved. This was somewhat effervescent, since even in the past an improved PMI has always not led to better outcomes, but the sentiment was understandable.

The second was bad news. The gender disparity gap has gone up in India and its already poor ranking worsened. Women hold up half the sky, the UN poster says. Women are half the country: Somewhat less in India because of the shameful sex ratio, but still a large number. If growth is not just corporate GDP but human welfare, then this is worrisome. I mean the world over women are liberating themselves, and in civilised India we think so too, and want it to be more so. But it is not so. The statistics used are pretty robust and so even Indian economists who never agree on anything will find it difficult to quibble on this gap.

Women and the girl child also star in the next global ranking. That's the malnutrition and hunger index. The absolute numbers are frightening. Forty per cent of the world's hungry and malnourished children are in India. Now poverty and hunger cut offs are always controversial and can make a marginal difference — poverty more so and malnutrition less as it's based on biological measurements. Having defined a poverty line in the seventies of the last century, which I have wanted revised but which kept on resurfacing like a rabbit out of a hat, I am not surprised at the debate. But there was a sensible suggestion in these columns. Uma Lele ('Feeding India', IE, November 3), who has a lot of global experience in these matters, in a mature tone admonished us for being clever on a substantial issue where marginal changes were not the big issue but the big problem whichever way you looked at it was. This needed remedying and when you do so the information base improves. Nothing works more than questions from senior policymakers to improve the statistical base of a decision.

I am impressed by the argument that for hunger use anthropomorphic rather than survey-based calorie norms because biometric measures give you the physical reality as it were rather than expenditure converted to food and then to calories. Strangely, there is a connection between the worsening gender disparity and the hunger numbers. Weak mothers will give birth to weak children. The baby will not get enough nourishment in the womb. Again, in the early years of childhood, the limits to which he or she will grow are being set. It is not that life is a matter of precise paths. But the boundaries in which outcomes will work out are set in early years.

A couple of decades ago, I had to make some tax-free money to fund my daughter's second year in college in the US and decided in the vacations to work on food security UN consultancies. In Egypt, I discovered that in the desert provinces of Upper Egypt — actually Lower Egypt if you are in Cairo or Alexandria, but they look at everything from the perspective of the Nile — malnutrition in women was high. When I was presenting my results a top official, a retired general, went at me and said they are alright, my soldiers come from there. I had to tell him that weak and anaemic mothers will never give birth to strong soldiers.

So let's get this straight. Even if your concern is not like mine on human welfare, but security in the narrowest military sense of the term, let's get rid of the problem of hunger rather than be smart on statistics to wish it all away. The link between the gender gap and malnutrition is much too obvious

to ignore. So let's get back to the three rankings of last week: Ease of doing business is good while gender gap and hunger are not so. Policy-wise let's travel from growth to development.

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