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Credibility and information

not need any of the above.

13.1.03
Why is it that hardly any one outside of the government circles, and I mean the right circles in this case, believes that inflation in Pakistan is indeed as low as what the Federal Bureau of Statistics and the State Bank of Pakistan claim it to be? The reason is simple. No one believes that the statistics that the government gives are right, no one thinks that the government is beyond manipulating data to suit their purpose, and everyone knows that the government has manipulated data in the past, and will continue to do so in the future as well.



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In other words, government has no credibility as far as data revelation is concerned. We know that international agencies have accused the government of manipulating the data in the past. This further corroborates the suspicions that the ordinary citizens of the country have. And it is not just the layperson that does not believe the government statistics, it is also the group that is educated, works in even the financial sector, and sometimes even the government.

Recently this controversy has again erupted though in a different guise. This time it is the inner government circles that are contesting the reliability of the data on which the recently launched World Bank poverty report is based. This is very interesting because a lot of the results of the poverty report are based on the data that has been collected and disseminated by the government of Pakistan itself. So now, it is the government circles that have been and are involved in collecting data, which are questioning the veracity of the data.

Furthermore, one of the criticisms of the report has been that it does not have poverty data beyond 1998-99. And most interestingly it is the same person making the criticism who was responsible for providing this data on behalf of the government of Pakistan, and had been unable to do so in the last Economic Survey of Pakistan.

So is it any surprise then that the general population does not believe in the statistics that the government of Pakistan keeps splashing across the media. Take the case of poverty again. All of us who have lived in Pakistan through the 1986-2003 period know that over the period, inflation was high in the initial years, production and GDP growth have been low in the 1990s, textile industry has been through massive difficulties, our exports have not grown, the Rupee has depreciated substantially over the period and has become stable only recently, jobs have been difficult to find and hold on to, and unemployment has gone up. We know that the government has reduced development expenditure substantially over the period, and it has deregulated many markets and allowed them to move towards market based pricing (which have been higher than the controlled prices of previous times). We know agriculture has been facing severe drought conditions in some of the years, and agricultural output, across the decade of the 1990s, has been very erratic. Could poverty have come down in these conditions?

Even the government figures that are relatively non-

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controversial point in the direction of increasing poverty: wage rates for unskilled have lagged behind Consumer Price Index rates, CPI for the middle class has risen more than for the low income groups, employment in government has (relatively) stagnated, unemployment has gone up and even enrollment rates in primary and secondary education are not showing the growth rates that were expected. Why should we believe that poverty could have gone down in this time period?

One major reason that people do not believe in government statistics is that most government departments and bureaucrats do not believe in sharing information that they collect and gather with the society at large, and in particular, with the researchers, academics and students trying to work on Pakistan and Pakistani data. If information is held back, and it is guarded by the mandarins as if everything was a state secret, and if all researchers who want to work on Pakistan are treated as potential spies and usurpers, how can anyone do quality work, and how can we have confidence in what the government says?

As a researcher trying to work on Pakistani data, I have been dealing with almost all Pakistani organizations that are repositories of one data set or the other. And I have many friends who have been trying to do the same as well. Each one of us has stories of how we have been frustrated, again and again, by one office and the next, by one bureaucrat and the next, in our efforts to get data out of them. The bureaucrats behave as if the data belongs to them, when it is the property of the people of Pakistan and we have every right, under the law, to have access to the data.

Every time one of my acquaintances or I have been successful in getting data out, it has been on the basis of personal connections. It has almost never been on merit. You have to know the person, lobby him for weeks, visit him often, placate his (usually it is a man) ego, and then, if he feels magnanimous, he might oblige. Or it has to be a good friend with whom you do

not need any of the above.

What is interesting is that the above holds true for organizations and data sets that have been created to gather information and give it to the public as well. I am talking of the Federal Bureau of Statistics in particular here. The data that FBS collects does not belong to the FBS, and is collected with the specific purpose that people can do research on Pakistan (the PIHS, HIES, and other surveys). But try getting it out of them. Even where they have 'formal' processes through which you can buy the data, they are so convoluted and give you such a runaround that we face the situation as described. Yet, I have been told, if you know someone there, you can get the CDs free and within the hour.

If the people of Pakistan do not believe the poverty figures or the inflation figures that the government gives, the easiest way to gain credibility would be by opening up these data sets to academics, students and the people of Pakistan. They can do research and find faults with the data. If they do not, and put their credibility on line in agreeing with the data, they will generate confidence in what the government is claiming. What could be a better way for the government to gain credibility?

Another benefit of opening up access to data would be that more research would be done on Pakistan, and if data is easily available, and does not depend on your friendships within these organizations, it might be that more researchers would be attracted to do work on Pakistani data. This will show up in better quality research which would become an input into policymaking. Some of the African countries have recently followed this path. They have made large data sets available to researchers across the world, and some of the best brains in the development economics world are now working on these data sets. The results, in terms of quality research, have been quite impressive.

But this requires a complete change of the mindset of the bureaucrats in all of the government organizations that collect data. They have to believe that they are not custodians of these data sets; they have to believe that it is the property of the people, and they have to believe that when researchers take these data sets they are not taking away something that belonged to them personally. This 'change' is unlikely. It has not happened in the last 50 years, it is unlikely to come soon, despite and freedom of information acts and so on. But without the change it is hard to see how quality research could be done in and on Pakistan, how government claims could be taken seriously, and how the debate on numbers could be settled professionally.

The individual bureaucrat, the individual office wins by restricting access to data. They can hide their incompetence, their lack of professionalism and their sloppiness, but the attitude, aggregated over all, hurts the country and erodes the 'writ of the state'. If I cannot trust some of the basic statistics that the government produces, and that affect me profoundly in my daily life, and know that the government and the bureaucrats are not beyond manipulating data for short term gains, how can I have trust in the system at the larger level? Despite all talk of openness in recent times, this issue of access to data has remained untouched.

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