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GLOBAL MEDIA AND THE DEVELOPMENT STORY: AN INTRODUCTION

G. PASCAL ZACHARY
WITH COMMENTARIES BY SIX LEADING JOURNALISTS

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Daily Times
GLOBAL HEADLINES

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often in communication development. The farmers don't even know that their country posted rapid growth last year, approaching 10 percent. In substance, farmers were far away from the news

FOREWORD

A vibrant media is indispensable for development. By shining a spotlight on policy debates, disseminating research results, and holding governments accountable, journalists play a critical role in the decisionmaking process. At the same time, they sometimes miss—or misinterpret—important stories. Additionally, reporters may face a variety of obstacles, from budget cutbacks to unsympathetic editors.

We asked a prominent journalist to write an article sharing his perceptions—based on more than a decade of reporting development stories for *The Wall Street Journal* and other influential outlets—on the strengths and weaknesses of media coverage of these issues. We also asked him to offer his recommendations for improving coverage. In order to get perspectives from around the world, we asked six additional journalists, spanning the globe from Argentina to Japan, to provide their own observations. We hope that the insights and suggestions from these essays will spur a deeper examination of how to enhance the media's contribution to the global effort to reduce hunger and poverty.

Joachim von Braun
Director General, IFPRI

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GLOBAL MEDIA AND THE DEVELOPMENT STORY: AN INTRODUCTION

G. Pascal Zachary

“If journalism cannot be both trusted and adaptable, it will fail.”

—IAN HARGREAVES,
professor of journalism, Cardiff University

High in the Peruvian Andes, an unexpected and severe February frost wipes out the potato crop of hundreds of farm families toiling at an elevation above 8,000 feet. The farmers have no safety net; they've lost not only their current crop but their seeds for the next growing season as well. “I am crying as if one of my own children died,” one farmer says, tears streaming down her face.

As a visitor, I am surprised by what comes—or rather, doesn't come—next. The news does not get out. No one knows what's happened. The farmers are mostly illiterate, they possess no radio stations or newspapers, and the Internet remains alien. Journalists rarely talk to them, either. Even their own government makes no announcement after learning of their emergency.

The plight of the Andean farmers, devastated by unexpected weather and now facing malnutrition as well as the difficult task of obtaining seeds for next year's potato crop, presents a classic problem in communication about development. The Peruvian farmers,

voiceless, essentially don't exist. Though their country posted rapid economic growth last year, approaching an impressive 10 percent, these Andean subsistence farmers remain one bad day away from the worst kind of food insecurity.

Their story has yet to make news in Peru and almost surely never will.

The plight of these poor farmers—and how the media should go about telling their story and many others like it—is the subject of this essay. How best, in short, can the media cover development?

The issue of development is one of the most divisive of our time. Development for whom? Privileged elites? The mass of poor? The striving middle classes? And development at what cost? Should it come at the expense of the environment, so that rapid economic growth lays the seeds for future catastrophes? Is development essentially economic or human? Is it best measured by the health and education of people? The market for corporate equities? Employment?

Wages and purchasing power? These questions spawn endless debates, made all the more confusing because there isn't even any agreement on who are the central actors in the drama of development. The nation-state? Multinational corporations? The local community? The ethnic group? The lonely individual?

Development is an amorphous term, of course. It refers to both the material well-being of diverse peoples, as well as their quest for a sense of dignity across the prism of culture, gender, and geography. While there is much disagreement about the best ways for societies to develop, the aims are universal. The goals of development are the reduction of poverty, the expansion of opportunity, and the establishment of basic norms covering essential elements of life, ranging from education and health to labor and the environment to food security and access to new communication technologies.

Because debates over development remain so thorny, the journalist who covers the subject faces an unenviable task. He or she must make sense out of contradictory facts and viewpoints, all the while being buffeted by ideological and regional differences. Indeed, how the journalist regards development depends, in part, on where he or she lives. Journalists in wealthy countries tend to see development as an inevitable process that can

“Journalists in training and when reflecting about themselves claim that they are the ears and eyes of society and the voices of the voiceless. In the Andean peasants’ scenario, the above claim just becomes an empty slogan—a statement from a textbook, rather than a practical one.”

—Peter Wamboga, chief reporter, Farmer’s Voice (Uganda), and coordinator, Environmental Journalists’ Association of Uganda (for full commentary see page 20)

be harnessed for good, or not. Journalists in developing countries are more polarized. Some are enthusiastic about development and the role of government in managing these processes. Others see development as creating new forms of exploitation, fresh challenges to democratic control, and a widening gulf between winners and losers.

I know the development debate first-hand, having written articles on the subject for some of the largest newspapers

and magazines in the United States. Though limited by being a journalist from a wealthy country who has written exclusively in English, I’ve reported from more than 40 countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa in the past 12 years and have lived in both London and Accra, Ghana, for a considerable period. My encounters with people around the world broadened my perspective and made me question my assumptions many times.

This essay will describe in broad outlines how the world’s journalists cover the story of development—and how they might do so more effectively. My aim is audacious. Journalists are a varied lot, writing in many languages, across highly diverse societies. Yet despite these differences, clear patterns emerge in how journalists handle the development story and how they might better do so. The stakes are high. While journalists are creatures of their societies, they

also create images, expectations, and a pool of knowledge that shape the terrain in which government and citizens act. As James Wolfensohn, former president of the World Bank, has argued, "A free press is not a luxury, but [is] at the absolute core of equitable development."

Wolfensohn's provocative comment requires some elaboration. The media, of course, is a reflection of society; political, social, and cultural leaders ultimately shape media coverage more profoundly than media actors themselves. However, journalists make choices, and how they choose to cover development issues is significant. The media help set national and international priorities on a wide range of current issues. Because of their considerable influence with both ordinary people and elites, journalists can highlight—or ignore—the importance of fighting hunger and reducing poverty as a central piece of a development agenda. They can choose to

emphasize—or ignore—the continuing significance of agriculture even in a world of high-tech factories, mobile phones, and rapid urbanization. They can celebrate the way development creates winners—at the expense of tracking the uneven effects of growth, and of documenting how the "losers" must cope with these inequities.

Choices about development coverage matter, simply, because journalism matters. Media campaigns about the worst excesses of rapid development—such as industrial pollution in China, child labor in Africa, or the spread of low-wage jobs in rich countries—contribute enormously to public debates and even policies. Government reforms are often preceded by media exposés or campaigns. Yet measuring the effect of media efforts is difficult, and even excellent reportage on development issues often only raises awareness of problems but doesn't contribute to solutions.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . .”

—CHARLES DICKENS

Any assessment of the media's coverage of development should begin with recognition of the paradoxes facing journalists today.

In many ways, it is the best of times for journalists. In wealthy countries, there is an explosion of interest among journalists in international reporting, fueled partly by high levels of immigration into the United States. At many daily newspapers in America, local and

global stories are tightly linked as immigrant communities both integrate into their new society and maintain (newsworthy) links back home. New programs on international reporting (such as Johns Hopkins University's International Reporting Project) have been created both to encourage journalists to report internationally and respond to the widening appetite for globetrotting. Occasional journalists, some of whom work for nongovern-

mental organizations (NGOs) concerned with development issues, increasingly compete with professional reporters, penning blogs and broadcasting video reports from afar over such sites as YouTube.

For journalists in developing countries,

a growing number of NGOs—which profess the goal of promoting media on development issues around the world—offer resources, training, and encouragement. I launched one of these NGOs myself in Ghana four years ago, working in the newsrooms of the country's leading papers and radio and television stations, offering hands-on training to journalists under deadline (and other) pressures. NGOs and multilateral organizations such as Oxfam, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations

Development Programme, and the World Bank provide a great deal of background information on development issues, though such information is often presented in a partisan perspective. Other international organizations offer deep background that is essentially balanced and of immediate use to journalists. Some international organizations publish media themselves, such as the United Nations's IRIN news service, Project Syndicate, and the Inter Press Service. And within developing countries, there's been a steady expansion of traditional print media.

Newspapers are expanding their circulation through the developing world. In India, home of probably the most impressive growth, there are some 300 newspapers with a combined circulation of 157 million, an increase of 12.9 percent over 2005, according to *The Economist*.

“The biggest hurdle facing many journalists is finding an interested outlet that will not impose its bias on the story. Being told by editors that conditions like cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer’s, or heart disease are not a problem in developing countries is unfortunately all too common.”

—Ania Lichtarowicz, senior broadcast journalist, BBC, and former BBC World Service health reporter
(for full commentary see page 14)

Radio and television are expanding as well. Across the arc of Arab-speaking countries, satellite technology has enabled Al Jazeera—seen by 300 million Arabs in 22 countries—to “present a rare challenge to the more or less complete global domination of English-language television news services,” notes Ian Hargreaves, a leading analyst of the media in Britain.

New electronic tools, meanwhile, have helped reporters across the world to get more relevant information more quickly and less

expensively than ever. And these information-technology tools are only getting less expensive and more effective. The Internet gives researchers access to vast amounts of data, including significant reports, articles, and even entire books that as recently as five years ago would have been difficult to obtain quickly in wealthy countries and virtually impossible to obtain in developing countries. Now the enterprising journalist with a Web connection, anywhere in the world, has the ability to quickly and authoritatively put local reportage into a

global context by drawing on a vast development literature.

Yet for journalists covering development around the globe, the best of times coexists with the worst of times. In rich countries, and especially in the United States, traditional media are undergoing a wrenching contraction, and newspapers are suffering the most, facing declining or at best stagnant circulations and advertising revenues, chiefly because of a shift from traditional media to the Internet. The result has been a reduction in "frills" such as international coverage. "Foreign correspondents have become a dying breed," the journal *Foreign Policy* declared in January. As recently as 2000, U.S. newspapers supported 282 foreign correspondents around the world. By 2006, the number had fallen by 20 percent. At the start of 2007, three American newspapers with distinguished traditions of international reporting (*Newsday*, *The Baltimore Sun*, and *The Boston Globe*) permanently shuttered their overseas bureaus. Fewer people on the ground will worsen the habit of international media to chase after crises, ignoring the less-dramatic

stories that may ultimately be more significant.

In developing countries, while the ranks of media professionals are expanding (see India, for instance), authoritarian governments are proving more skillful than many expected at muting the liberating effects of the Internet. Governments in China, Singapore, and Malaysia have shown that censorship, so long practiced in traditional media, can be imposed on new media forms as well. The insistence that the media give voice to the government's development aims remains the dominant pattern in many poor countries, despite new openings provided by radio and the Web. Bribery of individual journalists is widespread in Sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the world, undermining efforts to professionalize journalism through higher standards and better skills. "I've known journalists who write a story and then send an invoice," says one press official with a major development agency. "While journalists have been a force for greater transparency and accountability by exposing corruption, some media people are part of the corruption, too."

“Serving up atrocities is the business of diminishing returns.”

—HOWARD FRENCH, *NEW YORK TIMES*

Western reporters tend to see the development story through two very different prisms: sympathy for the "losers" in developing countries and "fear" over increased competition, especially in jobs and resources, from the "winners."

First, the sympathy. In their coverage of developing countries, Western journalists often presume the necessity of intervention by rich countries in the affairs of poor ones. As Andrew Mwenda, a columnist for Uganda's *Daily Monitor* and one of Africa's most talented

journalists, recently said, "The Western media, playing off stereotypes, reinforce the perception that Africa needs the 'saving hand' of the white man."

Mwenda's view is widespread among senior journalists in the developing world. In Latin America, journalists are nationalistic and rightly believe that solutions to the problems of development will arise out of their own experience. In Asia, journalists also write from a perspective of confidence. Western technologies and techniques are powerful, and they should be put in the service of Asian values.

These perspectives often clash with a Western media all too ready to organize coverage around "causes," whether genocide, plagues, famines, or exploitation of women and children. Coverage of black Africa, for instance, is deeply shaped by such media approaches. A *New York Times* article about children indentured to fishermen in Ghana leads a religious do-gooder from America to pay for the children's freedom, which in turn leads the *Times* to report on the freeing of these children and then—a few days later—leads the television star Oprah Winfrey to devote an entire hour-long program on the articles, the American do-gooder, the children, and the international migration organization that has been publicizing the problem of child

" . . . cynical and stomach-churning reports are often taken to be the hallmark of development reporting, judging by the ease with which Western journalists detail extreme suffering in Sub-Saharan Africa, post-conflict states, and less-developed countries where everything seems to be going wrong."

—Madhavi Tata, special correspondent, Outlook magazine (India)
(for full commentary see page 17)

labor for many years. By the time Oprah handles the shocking but redemptive story of the pricking of conscience and the rush to reform, the media is both participant and observer, and proud of each role.

Such self-righteousness is actually rare among Western journalists. When covering the "disasters" besetting poor countries, they typically evince pity for victims. "If it bleeds, it

leads" is an old newsroom adage. Yet covering human suffering promotes cynicism. "It wears you down," a *Newsweek* reporter has said. "You just keep running to one shithole after another."

By concentrating on sensational failures and graphic human suffering, journalists can first demean ordinary people in the developing world—and then justify doing so by insisting they are only trying to aid the victims. The media's exaggerated descriptions of helplessness are privately defended by journalists who argue that these distortions heighten the interest of viewers and readers who might not otherwise pay attention, and thereby enable aid agencies to attract more charitable funds. The stylized, routinized coverage of famine in Western newspapers well illustrates the merger of sensationalism, condescension, and caring. Journalists are encouraged to sound the alarm quickly by aid agencies, which have learned that "good"

publicity helps attract donor funds. Sometimes, Western journalists even tell their readers explicitly to donate money to certain charities that promise to save lives and ease suffering.

Yet the developing world is not merely a stage on which Westerners can flaunt their moral conscience. Journalists also find much to fear in the rapidly growing economies of China, India, Vietnam, Brazil, and elsewhere. In the minds of some Western journalists, developing countries consume precious resources and represent a unique threat to rich countries. These journalists, for instance, decry the loss of manufacturing jobs to China while repeatedly complaining about the “outsourcing” of quality jobs to India. Media in the United States and Europe carp about unfair labor practices and other “loopholes” that permit poorer countries to develop economically at the expense of the West.

Fear mongering by Western journalists sometimes provokes a backlash among journalists in developing countries who are justifiably proud of their countries' economic achievements. Even Western exposés of child labor—low-hanging fruit journalistically, designed to tug at the hearts of rich readers and viewers in the West—can prompt tough rejoinders from journalists in developing countries who empathize with the difficult choices poor people must make. In a 2005 report on child labor in African mines, IPS quotes a Senegalese children's rights activist

saying, “Child labor is evil, but it is a necessary evil, because without the income the children earn in the poorest countries of the world, their families would be worse off.” Only a rare Western journalist would recognize the social role played by child labor, though for reporters in the developing world such nuances are undeniable.

At their best, Western journalists are keenly aware of the costs of development and sometimes provide a more accurate and insightful tally of these costs than do the local media. Such fact-based and descriptive stories follow a useful template. “As China Booms, Millions of Children Are Left Behind,” a front page article in *The Wall Street Journal* noted in January. The story examined the plight of an estimated 22 million youngsters whose parents have left home to find work in cities.

Answering the question of who or what has been “left behind” in the development race is a staple of good journalism, providing an endless source of captivating, even arresting tales, and fresh opportunities to give voice to ordinary

people such as 16-year-old Zhao Han, who told the *Journal*, “I miss my dad a lot.”

That's a sentiment readers and viewers can clearly understand, which explains the appeal to journalists who always enjoy the rare feat of psychologically uniting their audiences at home with faraway victims of development.

“In the developing world, there is a huge problem with access to information. A lot of our information must come directly from officials, and if they don't like our questions, they simply won't answer them.”

—Nadia El-Awady, founding member and current president of the Arab Science Journalists Association and board member of the World Federation of Science Journalists
(for full commentary see page 15)

“While India continued to have famines under British rule right up to independence . . . they disappeared with the establishment of a multiparty democracy and a free press.”

—AMARTYA SEN,
Lamont University Professor, Harvard University

Journalists in developing countries have two essential, and not always compatible, duties. First, journalists must rouse their own fellow citizens, hold their governments to account, and provide the basic information and analyses that promote quality decisions by individual, business, and state actors. Second, journalists must interpret international forces, placing their own home turf into the context of the wider world, especially with regard to the story of development, since no country is an island and the development of a single country invariably involves interactions with faraway peoples and places for the purposes of trade, knowledge transfer, and migration flows.

The first task—holding the state accountable—is increasingly viewed by economists as a significant factor in the pace of development. As Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Laureate in economics has written, “Free speech and a free press not only make abuses of governmental power less likely, they also enhance the likelihood that people’s basic social needs will be met.” Amartya Sen, another Nobel laureate in economics, has argued that countries with activist media do not suffer famines because media attention prompts action by governments that cannot tolerate public disapproval.

To be sure, governments are skilled at co-opting journalists, anticipating the very process that

Sen describes and then derailing it. Indeed, both journalists and political leaders in developing countries have long appreciated their respective roles in presenting the story of economic development. In the period of decolonization after World War II, journalists in many Asian and African nations came under pressure to adopt so-called “developmental journalism,” which justified the media’s frank promotion of government programs on the grounds that the government wanted the best for its people. Even in wealthy nations, such as Japan, the press has often been used to help marshal “scarce resources” in order to boost the nation’s export potential and spur domestic savings. In other Asian countries, notably Singapore, Malaysia, and China, the practice of “developmental journalism” remains dominant, and journalists who refuse to promote the government’s aims are subject to sanction. In my experience with journalists in all three of those countries, explicit punishment often is unnecessary; journalists learn what is permitted, anticipate objections in advance, and then make practical compromises to avoid censure. Sharing the values and aims of the state, these journalists see no reason to oppose government positions or to question national priorities. And I have been told that in some Asian countries, journalists conduct negotiations with government censors, prior to publication, in order to avoid embarrassing gaffes in coverage.

In many parts of Asia and Africa, journalists still face lawsuits, jail time, and sometimes even the threat of violence. In parts of the former Soviet Union, journalists who take on the state also risk reprisals. In China, internal reportage on development failures remains stunted by government repression. But in much of the developing world, journalists have abandoned any alliance with the state and have chosen, to one degree or another, to play the role of watch-dog and citizen advocate.

The results are well-documented—and heartening. Journalists implicitly understand that economic growth without social well-being is not acceptable. They also implicitly embrace the values of transparency and accountability. Most countries in Latin America have a vibrant media and, because of wide gaps between the rich and poor in these countries, journalists pay a good deal of attention to development failures. In Africa, the trend is in the right direction. In Ghana, for instance, the outspokenness of radio journalists contributed to the victory of a reform government in 2000. In Asia, media generally are moving toward a more consistent watch-dog role. In Bangladesh, for instance, media investigations have led to crackdowns against illegal insider dealings by owners of banks, corruption in land development, and contamination of groundwater in the capital of Dhaka. Journalists who exposed these problems did not solve them, but their reports spurred officials to do so. In Thailand, the stories of enterprising journalists also have led to actions against corrupt officials.

Such examples are thankfully legion. However, even the best adversarial journalism in developing countries tends to be weighed down by statistics and statements from elite actors. Voices of ordinary citizens are rare,

reinforcing the notion that only powerful people matter in the story of development. And in the exceptional cases where ordinary people are showcased, journalists in developing countries often do so in order to make ideological points. In India, for instance, journalists recently have highlighted the problem of "cotton suicides" among farmers in the state of Maharashtra, but they've tended to blame international forces rather than internal Indian factors, striking a chord of economic nationalism in the face of hostile global forces.

In my own experience, journalists can powerfully influence the conversation about development simply by bearing witness to the suffering of ordinary people who have been "left behind." In the late 1990s, I spent months visiting two brothers in Sarawak, Malaysia, documenting their different struggles. One brother somehow got a job with a California disk-drive company in what was then the only high-tech factory on the island of Borneo. His life grew dramatically better, materially and psychologically. He received promotions, wage increases, and greater responsibility, which boosted his sense of worth and brought bounty to his family. His brother, by contrast, toiled as a rice farmer and occasional hunter, living in a mud hut without electricity, always facing chronic hunger, and burdened with rising resentment over his brother's good fortune. My article, which appeared on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*, made few comments about wider global forces, letting the actions and words of the two Malaysian brothers tell a complex story of double-edged development. The basis for the story was "saturation" reporting, a method that is especially inexpensive and available to local reporters, who in poor countries are surrounded by ordinary people and can observe them up close for long periods if only they desire to do so.

In addition to more often letting ordinary people directly address audiences, journalists in developing countries can pay more attention to other nonstate actors, especially NGOs such as Oxfam, bilateral and multilateral assistance agencies such as Britain's Department for International Development and the United Nations Development Programme, and multinational corporations such as Shell, Goldman Sachs, Sipla, Lafarge, and Volkswagen. By paying more attention to the activities of such actors, journalists might be less likely to exaggerate, and indeed sensationalize, the role of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the economic development of their countries. In Africa especially, many senior journalists are virtually obsessed with the IMF and the World Bank, and yet are relatively unmindful of wider global economic forces—such as currency valuations, private trade, and multinational investment flows—that in my view more decisively shape their country's economic conditions and development pace. Once again, the impulse to demonize "shadowy" foreign institutions, rather than raise questions about the performance of their own elites, satisfies the popular appetites of readers and viewers.

To be sure, journalists in developing countries face a variety of obstacles that complicate their efforts to comprehend and explain the development story from a global perspective. Some of these obstacles are shared with their Western counterparts, while others are

distinctive, arising from the relatively low pay, social status, and education of many journalists. A recent study by the media activist group Panos London, entitled "Whatever the Weather: Media Attitudes to Reporting Climate Change," documents how mundane factors can thwart journalistic ambitions to cover important global developments. A Honduran journalist noted in the study that climate change is a depressing topic. "It is a boring issue for the public," the journalist said. "I can't write every week about climate change; people will be bored." A Sri Lankan journalist complained that basic scientific literacy eludes his colleagues, saying, "Some journalists who take an interest are hopelessly confused."

"Sadly, stories on development issues are not in our mainstream daily reporting at Kyodo News or in other news media here in Japan."

—Tetsuji Ida, staff writer,
environment, energy, and development,
Kyodo News
(for full commentary see page 19)

New media have yet to transform journalism in developing countries, although as electronic technologies take root, new ways of covering the development story will surely arise. Some of the most promising outlets involve low-power radio stations, which give ordinary people the chance to speak over the airways, directly conveying their message. Text messaging of news may

also provide a low-cost outlet for poor people to get information that the mainstream media in their countries cannot or will not provide. Just as so-called "citizen journalism" is emerging in wealthy countries as a new way of plugging the gaps in coverage by professional journalists, ordinary people in developing countries are getting closer to the day when they can supplement, or even compete, with established media.

“Freedom of communications is an ongoing project without an ultimate solution. It is a project which constantly generates new constellations and dilemmas and contradictions.”

—JOHN KEANE,
professor of politics, University of Westminster

No matter what new forms of media emerge in the future—and notwithstanding the expansion of all media forms in developing countries—journalists around the world can improve their coverage of development. Here are three concrete steps that all journalists can take:

- Give voice to the voiceless: Journalists tend to concentrate on the powerful, reporting stories from the top down. Bottom-up reporting can produce memorable stories and give readers and viewers a clearer sense of the human dimension of a problem. By building stories around ordinary people, journalists can dignify the lives of these people and send a message that the voices of the poor and the disadvantaged enrich the debate over the direction of development.
- Look at what works: Because the media in the developed world “miss” the development story by emphasizing the sensational and the dysfunctional, journalists should invest more in documenting and understanding what works and why. While alerting people to problems is crucial, journalists too often forget that a steady diet of exposés can produce a sense of disillusionment, making readers and viewers lose all hope for a better tomorrow. When exposing a shocking or pervasive cost of development—whether in the case of exploited laborers, abused

children, or pillaged natural resources—journalists should make every effort to find examples of success that might balance the portraits of failure. To be sure, every success is limited and contingent, and journalists must be honest about the power of remedial action. Nevertheless, journalists who both document a problem and suggest reasonable solutions are providing a much greater public service than those colleagues who simply sound the alarm and then exit.

- Blame and shame, but explain and correct too: Journalists expose problems and shame and blame wrongdoers with regularity, but even at their best, they tend to report poorly, if at all, on corrective measures and remedies. The media should devote the same energy to explaining the wider causes of problems as they do to exposing scandalous behaviors.

These three recommendations are, of course, generic—and, if followed, would improve journalists' coverage of about practically every subject of significance. In closing, I want to provide two sets of highly specific advice, one for journalists covering development in wealthy countries and another for those covering development in middle- and low-income countries.

Rich-world journalists need to:

- Report on famines with greater sophistication:
 - Starving babies remain a staple of media coverage about food insecurity and famines. Journalists tend to concentrate on human distress and not the underlying causes of famine. To be sure, the media need to show the face of hunger, yet reporters too often ignore the deeper economic and political failures that usually lie behind most famines. These deeper forces are understandable and ought to receive equal attention in famine reports.
- Give agriculture its due:
 - Farming is boring to rich-country media. With the exception of arcane articles about agricultural subsidies or the ravages of crop failures, journalists rarely profile the lives of farmers and the issues they face. Agricultural growth is critical to development in China, India, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Rising farm incomes in China and India would do a lot to slow the shift from the countryside to the already-bloated urban areas. In Africa, rapid agricultural growth would likely do more to reduce poverty than any other single factor. Yet few journalists bother to learn about agriculture, and that's a missed opportunity—and one that is easily remedied.
- Pay attention to the struggling middle classes:
 - Western journalists provide distinguished coverage of the "losers" of development: the poor living in urban shanties, the exploited industrial workers, and women and children with no education or opportunity. The super-rich also regularly receive attention, partly to provide proof of the bounty of development and partly to show the widening divide in

many fast-growing countries. Overlooked, however, are the middle classes, often struggling and unsexy. To be sure, coverage of the middle classes in poor countries won't provide the sensationalism of wealthy people gorging themselves alongside shocking images of profoundly poor people. By comparison, the middle classes seem like a nonstory. They aren't. Rather, their fitful emergence around the world likely holds the key to the emergence of more stable democracies and government accountability.

Journalists in developing countries need to:

- Use statistics better:
 - Government statistics are often the backbone of stories about poverty, economic growth, hunger, and the like. These statistics are often unreliable and journalists in developing countries rarely examine the methods by which they were assembled, or attempt random sampling of their own. Journalists ought to do better in establishing larger patterns through the use of statistics. They also need to understand that numbers only hold meaning in comparison to other numbers. Statistics must be presented in sets, never alone.
- Investigate the hunger-industrial complex in their own countries:
 - Food aid of various sorts is big business in poor countries. Journalists there rarely report on the nexus between local entrepreneurs (some of whom are politically well-connected) and international agencies that supply food to needy people. Journalists need to monitor aid agencies, not only those working in the area of food and agriculture, but also those that profess to be helping poor countries develop. Generally, journalists trumpet the announcements of these

agencies, especially noting the dollar, euro, yen, and pound amounts attached to development programs. Just as journalists scrutinize their own government's development efforts, they should scrutinize donor efforts too. At the same time, journalists should be wary of joining with NGOs and bilateral and multilateral agencies in campaigns to eradicate this and assist that. Readers and viewers should not view journalists as handmaidens of foreign development agencies any more than they should view them as assets of their government.

- Closely observe trends in food imports, especially imports from wealthy countries:
 - Many poor countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, rely heavily on imported food. The public, and the government, needs a better understanding of the pros and cons of importing food, and journalists are an important group that can find out and disseminate this crucial information. African countries last year imported nearly \$2 billion in rice, for instance, so journalists could examine who grows food in their backyards, how they can better compete with imported food, and what might be the consequences of encouraging readers to depend less on imported food and more on home-grown stuff. At the same time, journalists could do more to raise the dignity of ordinary farmers in the eyes of city dwellers, who in many poor countries lack empathy for the rural poor.

“Reporters are less willing to focus on the importance of development as a central issue in their stories. One important fact explaining this change is the global transformation of the media into a massive industry more concerned with business than with people. But I refuse to accept this as the only reason, and I blame (us) the reporters for losing the focus on development.”

—**Martín Kanenguiser**, staff writer on economic issues, *La Nación* newspaper, Argentina, and author of *La Maldita Herencia*, a book about Argentina's foreign debt (for full commentary see page 22)

These recommendations are only the beginning of wider efforts to improve media coverage of development issues. The story of development, like the story of journalism, is an ongoing project without an ultimate destination. Just because we do not know the end of this story does not mean we cannot improve on the tales we tell. Journalists can and must.

G. Pascal Zachary teaches journalism at Stanford University, writes regularly about international affairs, and is the author of *The Diversity Advantage: Multicultural Identity in the New World Economy*.

TOO MUCH BIAS, TOO FEW RESOURCES

Ania Lichtarowicz, senior broadcast journalist, BBC, and former BBC World Service health reporter (United Kingdom)

G. Pascal Zachary pinpoints many of the issues facing both international and local media reporting on development, particularly with the recent significant cuts in specialist correspondents.

The biggest hurdle facing many journalists is finding an interested outlet that will not impose its bias on the story. Being told by editors that conditions like cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's, or heart disease are not a problem in developing countries is unfortunately all too common. Challenging long-held attitudes is a must; not only with editors but also within governments, businesses, and NGOs.

Training and supporting local journalists is key, but so is pushing international media to give their correspondents the time and resources to cover development stories properly. So much money goes into covering elections or budget

reports, yet the idea of allowing a health reporter to have the same resources when covering the spread of an emerging disease would be mocked in many newsrooms. This is often the case for specialist reporting, with editors preferring to send general news hacks to cover complex scientific and economic issues; accuracy appears to be less important than office politics.

Identifying the opportunities presented by new technology in developing countries is paramount in changing how development is covered. Zachary uses text messaging as an example; Voice over IP, podcasting, satellite radio, broadband, and 3G (voice and data communication) are already beginning to influence the mainstream media. This could revolutionize the way development is reported, but only if journalists are prepared to break away from the current norm. ■

POLITICAL PRESSURES

Nadia El-Awady, founding member and current president of the Arab Science Journalists Association and board member of the World Federation of Science Journalists (Egypt)

Last year I was covering the work of an NGO in the south of Egypt that was helping relocated farmers reclaim desert lands around Lake Nasser. As I spoke with people who were benefiting from the program, however, another story emerged. Large amounts of money were being dumped into an international aid program in order to help these people out, but they weren't actually receiving what they had been promised. They were also basically being kept hostage on the lands the government had handed to them, and could not leave unless they received permission, otherwise they might have lost their land. At the same time, they were not provided with the bare necessities of running water and sanitation, schooling for their children, hospitals, and so on. They were living in a large concentration camp.

Every story has more than one side. And although this particular story was not the one I had been asked to cover by the media organization I was freelancing for, I started trying to get in touch with officials to hear their side of this story. I ran into difficulties immediately. As long as I was asking the "right" questions, I'd get answers. I was allowed to ask questions that would naturally result in a positive spin on the role of the government or the international aid program in the area. But once I started asking about some of the problems, I hit a brick wall. The officials would get angry. They'd tell me I had no right to ask such questions. And they'd hang up.

- It is important for journalists to monitor aid agencies. Sometimes corruption occurs at the expense of some of the poorest people in the world.
- It is important to get the human side of the story. A lot of money goes into development projects, but is that money mostly benefiting the people responsible for implementing them?
- In the developing world, there is a huge problem with access to information. A lot of our information must come directly from officials, and if they don't like our questions, they simply won't answer them. And documented information, if available to begin with, is more often than not misleading or plain-and-simple wrong.
- To cover a story, journalists need a publication both willing to cover the costs and to publish it. A large number of local media organizations are state owned. That means either that they won't cover the "wrong" kind of story, or that you have to work for them to publish with them. Opposition media organizations, on the other hand, often take the more sensationalistic angle in covering their stories. They want "the juice" on the government to make it look bad. Balanced coverage frequently fails them.

- Finally, covering a story that could shine a negative light on your country for an international media organization could result in a local journalist being ostracized in his or her own country. A young journalist once covered female circumcision in Egypt for CNN. She was blasted by just about everyone in the country for giving such a bad image of her country to the world. The logic was that if she had covered this for the local media, it would have been an internal matter for internal discussion. But this way she was airing the country's dirty laundry for everyone to see.

I once helped produce a video on pollution of the River Nile for the BBC. I was unaware at the time, due to my inexperience, that our government insisted that foreign media get explicit permission to cover anything within the country. The BBC producer and I got most of the footage we needed without a permit. But eventually our state security police got word of what we were doing. We had to get permission

to speak with a certain official, applied for it, and never got it on time. That meant that they had heard that we were there and covering something. For the first time in my life I was politely asked to visit the media division of Egypt's state security police. I was asked in detail what we were doing in the Delta region and what the program was about. Since this occurred after the producer had left, there was basically nothing they could do about it. The program aired a few months later. But I can tell you, a visit like that will make the best of journalists have second thoughts about covering some sorts of stories. It's a message. We're watching you.

I don't mean to be negative with these comments. Journalists do cover and should continue covering these and other stories despite the difficulties. But it's important to understand that there are difficulties and to appreciate what some of our best journalists go through to get high-quality stories published or broadcast. ■

DEVELOPMENT: WHAT IS THE RIGHT FRAME?

Madhavi Tata, special correspondent, Outlook magazine (India)

There is no magic wand to development; it's a continuous process for the welfare of citizens.

But cynical and stomach-churning reports are often taken to be the hallmark of development reporting, judging by the ease with which Western journalists detail extreme suffering in Sub-Saharan Africa, post-conflict states, and less-developed countries where everything seems to be going wrong. And as Western definitions would have it, democracy is integral to development. So would that mean development in China is stage-managed?

What constitutes development? Is a rise in general per capita income the only criterion because it is quantifiable and can be compared with indicators in the Western world? The state of Kerala in India is as developed, if not more so, than many of the states in the United States (if one takes into account factors such as life expectancy, education levels, urbanization, and so on). Kerala will not be classified as developed, however, because it doesn't have the per capita income of developed countries!

Another problem in development reporting is that journalists often view a single, micro-level success story as the general panacea for all miseries of a similar nature.

I agree with Zachary that development stories are regarded as boring. I remember a former editor of mine saying that "farmers are not our readers" when I chose the front page for a

report about a farmer committing suicide due to extreme poverty.

Zachary rightly says that government statistics about economic growth alone cannot be synonymous with development. This is very true. Of what use are such designer statistics to a farmer who cannot get minimum prices for his produce? An example: At the same time that Indian Finance Minister P. Chidambaram was boasting about an 8 percent growth rate, farmers in Andhra Pradesh were dumping tomatoes on the highways. The reason? They were getting only 1 rupee per kilogram in the wholesale market. The villain: no minimum support price.

Zachary is also right when he says that NGOs use media reports and journalists to attract more donors. An international NGO based in Chennai working on AIDS expressed unhappiness when I reported on child labor among families in Guntur (Andhra Pradesh) in instances where both parents were HIV positive. Their response stemmed from the fact that they draw huge funds from the World Bank and are supposed to curb child labor by helping out these very families—so this report would adversely affect their funding flow.

Zachary talks about cotton suicides in Maharashtra being blamed on "international" factors, implying a mis-emphasis in cause. I would like to point out to him one such factor. Monsanto Mahyco Biotech Ltd was selling cotton seeds in 450 gram sachets at a market retail

price of Rs 1,850. Of this amount, the royalty or trait value going to Monsanto was Rs 1,250. In China, Monsanto charges Rs 45 as royalty per sachet and in the US Rs 108. The high rate charged by Monsanto in India fueled the formation of spurious BT seed companies, which sold seeds at Rs 600 per sachet. These spurious seeds were the main reason farmers committed suicides in Andhra Pradesh in 2003-04. In

January 2006, for the first time in India, the Andhra Pradesh government filed a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) on behalf of farmers and saw to it that multinational corporations like Monsanto were indicted by the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices (MRTP) Commission for violation of anti-trust laws in the country and for adopting restrictive trade practices of unreasonable royalty/trait value. ■

PERSISTENCE, BUT WITH INSIGHT AND EMPATHY

Tetsuji Ida, staff writer, environment, energy, and development, Kyodo News (Japan)

After reading a very thought-provoking essay by Gregg Zachary, I looked around my office in Tokyo, and realized that it is very hard to find fellow reporters to whom I can give a copy of this essay and discuss the recommendations. Sadly, stories on development issues are not in our mainstream daily reporting at Kyodo News or in other news media here in Japan. Kyodo News is one of the largest wire services in Asia, and yet we filed only 15 stories on the Millennium Development Goals in 2006; 6 of them were mine. I'm always wondering why this should be the case.

Famines in Africa, water crises in developing countries, children dying from infectious diseases ... it is sad to say, but the situation has not changed much for a long time. And yet, someone said to me that these things are not "news" anymore. Zachary points out that we Western journalists should report on famines in

a more sophisticated manner, not merely by focusing on dying children, but by putting more emphasis on the deep causes.

This is a very important message, and I couldn't agree with him more. Our reports on development issues still suffer too often from stereotypes. We definitely need to report on them in more sophisticated ways in order to stir the imagination of our readers.

Zachary also points out that journalists should give voice to the voiceless. Needless to say, this is the most important task for us.

So, what we need to do is in fact rather straightforward and clear. Always try to offer deep insights into development problems and try to give voice to the voiceless. Finally, we need to continue to focus on this issue even if it is not a rewarding business. I believe continuity will give us power. ■

THE MEDIA NEED TO BE EMPOWERED

Peter Wamboga, chief reporter, Farmer's Voice (Uganda), and coordinator, Environmental Journalists' Association of Uganda

Gregg Zachary has done justice to the issue of development and journalism on the one hand, and to journalism-versus-development on the other. And when he poses the question: "How best, in short, can the media cover development?" in view of the plight of Andean farmers, devastated by unexpected weather and faced with malnutrition as well as with the difficult task of obtaining seeds for next year's potato crop, his question is in and of itself intriguing to me as a journalist.

His question points to shortcomings in the media's acclaimed "watchdog" role. Journalists in training and when reflecting about themselves claim that they are the ears and eyes of society and the voices of the voiceless. In the Andean peasants' scenario, the above claim just becomes an empty slogan—a statement from a textbook, rather than a practical one. Peasants, in Africa and elsewhere, want to see the media give voice to them. Cameras and pens should portray correctly to policymakers (and to donors too) the woes poor people face: famine and food shortages; inadequate seed and water for themselves and for their cattle (if they are herdsman/women); poor roads and/or lack of microfinance, transport, and market access; and lack of basic medical care and education for their children.

These are the key issues the poorest in Africa and other developing countries grapple with day in and day out—the issues they want

addressed urgently. They do not argue for luxuries.

So Zachary's articulation of the media's absence in remote parts of Peru—as is the case in many parts of Uganda, my country—throws into sharper relief the plight of peasants in their greatest hour of need. His presentation not only points to what one may call the inefficiency of the media, or its thin presence on the ground, particularly in the hard-to-reach areas, but also highlights the challenge local journalists face in affording the cost of traveling to remote areas.

The Western media with its power of money, machines, and influence usually reaches these remote areas, but with a set agenda and perception about the peasants: that they are an uncivilized, primitive lot who need Western aid—relief food, medicines, or donor support. But these are not solutions—they only complicate and perpetuate the plight of the poor. What the poor need foremost is their government's attention and the pragmatic solutions that provide the basics I have noted above. This is absolutely the case in Uganda as it is in many other developing countries I have visited.

Sometimes, when the World Bank and political rhetoric claim that developing countries have posted high economic growth rates—and the reality is that these growth rates have not translated into food on the table, medical

access, quality education, and enough water for poor people—these authoritative voices are the sources of the problems with regard to development and journalism, rather than partners in the solutions. Journalists, in a desperate search for what donors and governments say, stumble on such rhetoric and spread it even further.

So journalists require empowerment just as the communities they should report on do. Empowerment would enable journalists to play their role effectively by reaching unreachable areas and bringing out the voices of the voiceless. Both groups—journalists and the communities that ought to benefit most from development—need empowerment, but in very different ways. ■

WE MUST FOCUS AGAIN ON DEVELOPMENT

Martín Kanenguiser, staff writer on economic issues, La Nación newspaper, Argentina, and author of La Maldita Herencia, a book about Argentina's foreign debt

I live and work in a country that a hundred years ago seemed to be a potentially rich nation but now has lost not only that goal but also its identity as one of the most equal countries in Latin America. This economic and political background is what I bring with me to my work. But the same dramatic changes that the country has suffered in the last thirty years—in particular after 2001, when 55 percent of the population fell into poverty—have been accompanied by a different way of doing journalism. Reporters are less willing to focus on the importance of development as a central issue in their stories.

One important fact explaining this change is the global transformation of the media into a massive industry more concerned with business than with people. But I refuse to accept this as the only reason, and I blame (us) the reporters for losing the focus on development.

Anyway, I have to say that six years after our last economic crisis, there is more concern about the need to transform high GDP growth into sustainable development. The Argentine economy has grown by almost 9 percent a year since 2003 and that has helped to reduce

poverty and unemployment; but still, the income earned by the richest 10 percent of the population is 31 times higher than that of the poorest 10 percent. This issue appears in the media from time to time, but I still see too many stories offering, as Gregg Zachary says, poor explanations about the roots of these problems.

As journalists we also dedicate too much time to short-term issues, and I agree with Zachary's conclusion that we should explain the broader context in which a person is suffering from hunger, unemployment, and lack of housing or land. I also believe that we should focus more on the destination of the funds of international donors and multilateral institutions (such as the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank), which give too much money to consultants and sometimes produce poor results through their programs.

Finally, I have to disagree with Zachary's suggestion about the role of reporters in the search for solutions. In my opinion, that's the job of the government and the civil society as a whole. Without taking sides, our function is to tell the stories in the best, most powerful way. ■

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