

# QUANTIFICATION OF MEDIA FREEDOM AND DEVELOPMENT: A CRITICAL COMMENTARY

**N. Usha Rani**

ICSSR Senior Professor Fellow,  
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication,  
University of Mysore, India.  
usharani\_mc@yahoo.co.in

**Abstract.** All development aims to improve human lives by ensuring opportunities and choices. There is transition in development thinking placing human well-being beyond conventional economic growth. Development is no longer about increase in income but it is about addressing deprivation of education, health, and living standards to live in an equitable society. According to Amartya Sen, development narrative has changed to include a new approach to development that is 'freedom'. Global agencies are improvising upon methodologies and tools to capture development both quantitatively and qualitatively. Development index measures various dimensions and indicators. The discourse on Media as a dimension in UNDP HDI Reports makes interesting revelations. This paper is a critique of the role of HDI reports in conceptualizing media as a dimension to measure development. It focuses on innovative methods in measuring intangible indicators like voice and accountability measure to correlate with human development. The study shows, initiatives to standardize media index to integrate with Human Development Index have not met with success.

**Keywords:** *Media index, human freedom, development, voice, political freedom, participation, gender equality*

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## Introduction

The meaning of development has undergone a sea change and social scientists continue to conduct experimental work to understand the intricacies of development. The assumption of development from income perspective is replaced with new innovative thoughts and ideas linked to human well-being and freedom to live. All development aims to improve human lives by ensuring opportunities and choices. World organisations are striving to evolve a development process by enlarging people's freedoms, opportunities, and choices rather than emphasising on increasing per capita income, which makes development economy centric. There is transition in development thinking placing human well-being beyond conventional economic growth. Concept of freedom has dominated development narrative, as people are gradually becoming aware of participatory democracy, political liberty, and deprivation. Development is no longer about increase in income but it is about addressing deprivation of education, health, and living standards to live in an equitable society.

The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives (Human Development Report, 1990, p.9). Amartya Sen defines 'development as freedom' (Sen,1999, p.5). In one word, one gets to understand here the integrated approach to development focusing more on freedoms that require removal of sources of 'unfreedoms' (Sen, 1999, p.15) like poverty, social deprivation, intolerance and others . 'Development is a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy... it contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialisation, or with technological advance, or with social modernization' (Sen, 1999, p.3).

Thus, the fundamental view of development has changed from economic progress to freedoms from deprivations. Development requires economic and social support in equal measure. Development is not about poverty per se but it is about dealing with sources of poverty meaning tackling variety of deprivations.

Emphasising the role of freedom in development, Sen identifies 'five types of freedom, which include, political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security' (Sen, 1999, p.10). The development narrative has changed to include a new approach to development that is freedom. The shift from economic development to participatory development focuses more on social opportunities in the world of 'inequality of opportunity' to establish a level playing field for participation and equality.

'Development is multidimensional' (HDR.2003, p.29) is the premise that is propounded by world economists. The per capita income measure approach has been criticised by policy analysts who instead have propounded on alternative approaches to development that focuses on 'expansion of people's capabilities' (HDR.1990 p.16). These new approaches have received recognition by UN agencies capturing Human Development Rankings of various countries year after year using different measurable dimensions and indicators.

## Human Development Reports – New Concepts of measuring Media intervention

Development is multidimensional and is measurable using both quantitative and qualitative metrics. UNDP is in the forefront involved in global profiling of development of each country. Since 1990, the UNDP has been publishing Human Development Reports (HDR) and has become a platform for discourse on development improvising new measurement tools and methodologies paving way for providing empirical evidence for its findings. HDR is an opportunity for policy makers, researchers, and social scientists to experiment with new dimensions and indicators to make development measurable.

The review of HDRs since 1990 will enable us to trace the transition from traditional income approach to new world human development order democratising development. The Reports show the influence of policy makers and researchers in using new dimensions and indicators to measure development.

In its earliest and first ever HDR in 1990, United Nations exclaimed, that 'Human development is a process of enlarging people's choices' (HDR, 1990, p.1). It said 'Income is a means, not an end' (HDR 1990 p.10). The 1990 Report which introduced the human development index (HDI) a feasible statistical measure of human progress, identified three major dimensions, such as longevity, knowledge (literacy) and decent living standards (per capita income), as the essential elements of human development.

This Report is the first of its kind, which discussed about linking human development with human freedom. It illustrated the correlation between Human Development Ranking with that of political system of a country. It showed that countries with high HDI ranks have democratic system and vice versa in Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa and Latin American regions. However, human freedom was not accepted as a dimension, as it could not establish the validity of the relationship between human freedom and human development but it succeeded in contributing new concepts of freedom and opportunities as additional indicators of human development. Nevertheless, freedom related to media intervention in development was not broached.

The 1991 HDR assumes significance as more refined and included human freedom index for the very first time and discussed about the challenges of measuring freedom. It said that 'Human development is incomplete without human freedom' (HDR.1991, p.16). Though the major focus of the report was about financing human development it continued freedom discourse by emphasizing on enlarging people's choices to make 'development more democratic and participatory' (HDR 1991. p.1). It argued that Humana's Freedom Index measuring levels of freedom of 88 countries is not universally accepted as it requires to prove causality and further research. The Report nevertheless recognized some pattern suggesting correlation between levels of human development and levels of human freedom. Improvement in HDI scores was attributed to moving towards better democratic systems in some countries.

The relationship between HDI and HFI is complex but it argued that any HDI should give adequate weight to human freedom as one of its indicators. The problem with HFI is it

does not have stable indicators unlike HDI. The Report recognized the change in political freedom in many countries including Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Latin America in the 1990s that influenced the rate of HDI. Perhaps for the first time, the issue of political censorship of the press, independent newspapers, independent book publishing, independent radio and television networks, are cited as indicators of HFI drawing global attention to the significance of media intervention in development.

The development of Political Freedom Index was the highlight of 1992 HDR capturing development from human rights perspective and is based on the simple premise that 'economic growth does not automatically improve people's lives' (HDR.1992, p.3). HDR in this report recognized political freedom as a vital component for people to participate in development process. It cites the example of India's Panchayat as an example for community decision-making a local level process. It revisits some of such traditional initiatives where decision-making is based on dialogue and consensus. The checklist of indicators of political freedom consists of media censorship, media ownership, and freedom of speech and expression, gradually moving towards recognition of the role of media in development. Interestingly, freedom of expression consisting of media indicators was one of the components measured along with other indicators. Media freedom presumed to be unmeasurable was quantified using realistic statistical analysis.

People's participation is the central issue of HDR 1993 at a time when the world witnessed the change of guard in some of the communist regimes ushering a new era of democratic systems. HDR emphasised on political and economic democracy as major dimensions of development advocating people's participation. The criteria of effective participation explored the role of free press to promote people's participation in development. Information revolution can make harder for governments to 'monopolise the flow of information' (HDR 1993, p.24) cited as a variable to achieve a greater sense of participation of people in public events. Media as a dimension gradually gained currency in development discourse. Biggest challenge of media was to address women, the non-participating majority in development owing to low educational attainment and social norms besides others.

Human development discourse paved way for emergence of a new concept of Social Development redefining development agenda. The HDR 1994 introduced the concept of human security urging nations to invest in development, not in arms. Press censorship under human rights violations considered as an indicator for measuring human security put spotlight on media in this report that made 'profound transition in thinking – from nuclear security to human security' (HDR 1994, p.22). Gender inequality became the focus of HDR 1995. It introduced two tools to measure gender disparities across the world. It advocated the new mantra, 'human development must be engendered' (HDR, 1995, p.2). The exclusion of women from development radar prompted policy makers to introduce two composite measures to measure gender inequality. One is GDI Gender related Development Index and the other is GEM – Gender Empowerment Measure. Across the globe, these are standard measures

recognized in policy making regarding equal rights for women along with men and to fight gender based discrimination. The linking of HDI with GDI led to the engendered development model that widened choices for both men and women.

Economic growth that captured development profile of countries became a means rather than an end in HDR 1996 advocating humanising growth through equity. Interestingly, the Kerala growth story captured world attention and the state recorded highest HDI rank among Indian states where its achievements in education, health and living standard was compared with some of the most advanced countries.

A communist ruled state in Indian democracy challenged the hypothesis that economy under communist regime scores low on HDI. In India, Kerala was ranked first in HDI rankings and continues to have high scores. Global economists drawn to new economy story that emerged from China. Attempts to link HDI with freedom was contradicted by the growth China gained with Communist political system that defied the earlier premise that high growth is linked to democratic form of government. In 1996, China was ranked 171 whereas India at 184 with Europe receiving very high scores along with US.

The HDR 1997 is notable for developing a new thesis on poverty, 'as a denial of choices and opportunities for living a tolerable life' (HDR.1997, p.2). Poverty is not about low income but is all about deprivations. The HPI – Human Poverty Index, proved that Human poverty and income poverty do not always move together. For example China reduced human poverty by reducing basic deprivations in education and health. Significantly, the Report introduced Human Poverty Index (HPI) – to measure poverty in a community continuing the discourse on measuring the immeasurable. Nineties witnessed improvement in the methodology in developing composite Index to measure development by developing a variety of other indices ultimately changing the perception of development.

Consumerism in the midst of revolution of information technology and telecommunications forms the core index of 1998 HDI Report. Think globally, act locally became the mantra of this report. For the first time, unbalanced flow of information became a point of debate in the UN report expressing serious concerns of adverse impact of global media and global advertising through satellite television on human progress. Information imbalance and its link with development is debated continuing media centric narrative in measuring human development. The earlier hypothesis of democracy linked to development gets intrigued with China's advertising and consumerism in a socialist market economy proclaiming modernisation against westernisation. China's economic growth becomes one of the challenges for the global economists working in identifying dimensions of development.

'Shrinking space, shrinking time and disappearing borders' (HDR.1999, p.1), the outcome of globalisation compelled HDR 1999 to focus on communications technologies enriching the debate on the role of media in development. The Report acknowledged that the flow of information is as powerful as that of free flow of money and trade. Communications

change economic competition, empowerment, and culture, inspiring global conversation' (HDR.1999, p.57). Knowledge economy became an asset came to be considered as more than GDP had developmental impacts. Knowledge is power redefined the income heavy dimensions of measurement. Information Index Society –IIS prepared by international organisations was advocated by HDR with a caveat to adapt the index to include indicators more relevant to progress in developing countries than industrial countries.

Information Index is a significant initiative in analysing the feasibility of information economy as a dimension in measuring development. The Index consisted of four major indicators, such as information, computer, Internet and Social emphasising on 'building people's capacity to use information through education, freedom of the press and civil liberty' (HDR 1999, p.66) and the Information society index of over 55 countries was developed to understand the feasibility of this dimension. The findings had few surprises. Small countries like Finland, Netherlands, and Singapore outperformed information economy giants like United States in the adoption of information technology endorsing the initiative to measure media as one of the most powerful indicators of development.

The 2000 HDR appeared to counter the challenges of human freedoms and opportunities in the era of globalisation, liberalisation, privatisation coupled with communication revolution. Obviously, report reiterated on the theory of human rights as critical to human freedom. Human rights issue reinforced link between the rights of freedom of expression and political participation as well and development calling for a fundamental shift in development approach. Human rights as a dimension in measuring development reinforce Inclusive democracy that calls free and independent media to fulfill the right of freedom of speech and expression. However, the Human rights as a dimension did not play a role in the preparation of HDI despite the report reiterating on human freedoms.

A classic comparison of India (128) and China (99) showed HDI ranks between democratic and communist countries from an economic growth perspective. Nevertheless, lack of research tools to quantify and validate data of freedoms restrained international organisations from experimenting with new approaches to development.

HDR 2001 became a platform for introducing a new Technology Achievement Index – TAI, a new measure of a country's ability to participate in the network age. TAI assumes significance as shows correlation with HDI. Both India (63) and China (45) score TAI ranks under the category of dynamic adopters than potential leaders and leaders of technology and the ranks correlate with HDI scores. Diffusion of technology information and communication is added as an indicator of TAI enlarging the scope of media intervention in development.

In its pursuit for expanding choices, HDR in its 2002 report debates on the role of political power in shaping development. It reiterates the need to set media free from state control, political coercion and corporate pressures. This report illustrates that HDI uses different paths to measure development whether it is human poverty, gender related, and gender empowerment indices. Despite development of Human Freedom Index in 1991 and

Political Freedom Index in 1992, HDI could not consolidate those measures for integration with HDI even in 2002. Vital issues like political and civil freedoms are excluded in measuring human development of a country. Nevertheless, the 2002 report made an analysis of indicators as press freedom based on data of 2000 and created a set of Democracy dimension consisting of Subjective indicators of governance. Under Press Freedom, India scores (42) higher rank than China (80) but Singapore with an HDI rank of 23 under high developed category gets low score in press freedom. It shows democracy and HDI cannot be linked as India's better scores in democracy fails to increase its HDI scores. It scores very high ranks in polity score, civil liberties, and political rights but indicators of political freedom fails to lift India's HDI scores. However, free and independent media considered the lifeblood of democracies by HDR. Media can make democratic institutions work by providing a voice to the citizens, facilitating civic engagements and finally serving as a watchdog of government. The concept of human development proves to be 'larger than the index'. Media freedom is no way less important to human development but is complex to measure objectively and tangibly. Measures of democracy are both objective and subjective. For example, voter turnout can be measured but the political and corporate pressures on press freedom being subjective are open to bias.

Focusing on Millennium Development Goals, the HDR 2003 reiterated its global efforts to reduce poverty, human rights, and environmental sustainability. Media intervention in implementation of UN Millennium Declaration reinforced 'human rights and social equity to promote the well-being of all people and to ensure that poor and marginalized people—including girls and women—have the freedom and voice to influence decisions that affect their lives' (HDR.2003, p.18). China and India today are cited in the world as strong emerging economies practicing different political ideologies, together have one third of the world's population. However, China, an authoritarian state has higher HDI score than India due to its fastest sustained economic growth reiterating the premise that political ideologies is not an impediment in achieving economic growth.

Cultural liberty in diversity is the hallmark of HDR 2004. It introduced policy of inclusion to attain equitable growth. The report is unique for promoting cultural freedoms introducing multiculturalism in globalisation recognising diversity as one of the components of human development. Efforts to develop an Index of Cultural Liberty failed owing to conceptual and methodological challenges. 'It will never be fully possible to compare homogeneous Japan with diverse India' (HDR.2004, p.31). However, the report introduced, *The Minorities at Risk data set* quantifying cultural exclusion that was created at the University of Maryland's Center for International Development and Conflict Management.

The data set assumes importance as every country has a minority population who face discriminatory policies of majority society. The data set consists of Living mode exclusion, economic exclusion and political exclusion measures quantifying discriminatory practices including freedom of expression among other indicators of political rights. One of the major

sources for constructing these measures is journalistic accounts and human rights reports. These measures show decline in political and economic exclusion of minorities in several countries when compared with high rate of discriminating social practice and historic neglect. The Report claims that religious freedom is central to human development.

HDR 2010 argues about the new concept of human development beyond the indicators of economic progress. 'Substantive freedom' (HDR.2010) the people enjoy is the benchmark reiterated by economists for determining the level of development.

New indices and new indicators have been introduced to augment the broader scope of human development. It introduces three new multidimensional measures of inequality, poverty, and freedoms. Measuring multidimensional inequality is a vital innovative tool that showed the estimate of inequality in each dimension of the conventional HDI tool. IHDI – Inequality adjusted HDI was more refined and illustrated that countries with low human development have more multidimensional inequality. 'The IHDI captures the inequality that the HDI does not measure' (HDR.2010, p.89). The second new tool was introduced measuring gender inequality. It is called Gender Inequality Index –GII, a unique method for measuring multidimensional inequality in gender.

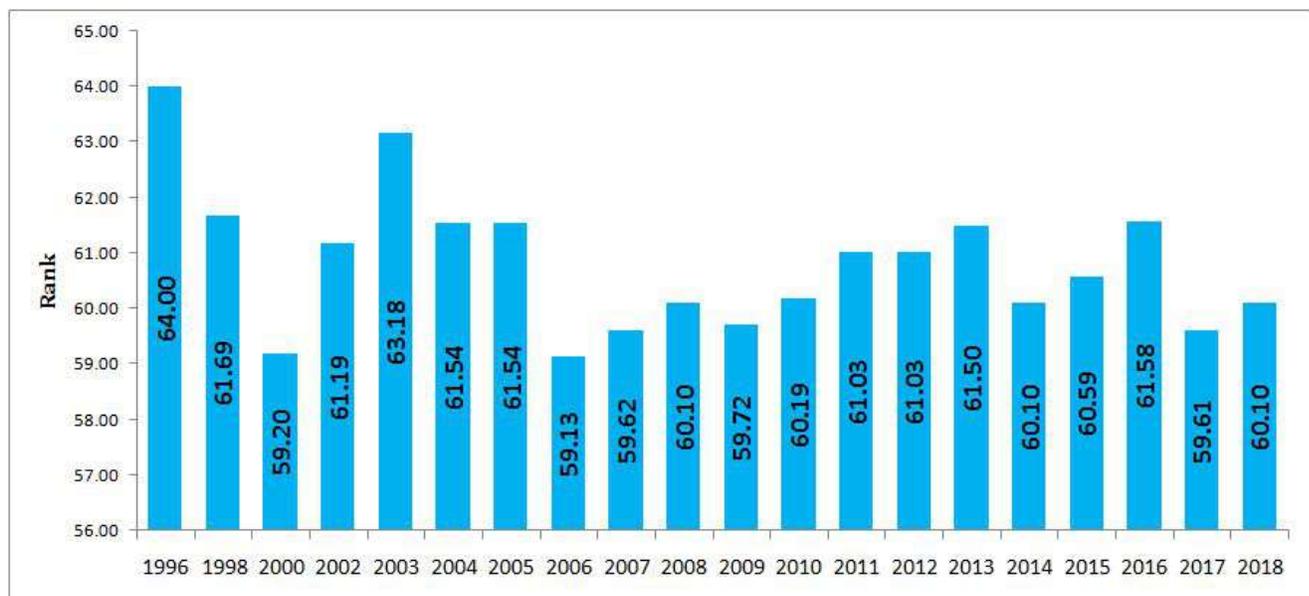
Today GII has been recognized worldwide as an advanced measure of gender equity. According to 2010 reports HDI ranking (119) of India was better than GII (122). China had better GII score of 38 and medium HDI score of 89 showing better performance in both HDI and GII. The third significant tool that led to paradigm shift in HDI tool is the introduction of Multidimensional Poverty Index - MPI. The essence of this index is its methodology to measure deprivations. 'This new measure replaces the HPI–Human Poverty Index' and gets global recognition as an alternative measure of well being.

Universalism became the core approach of HDR 2016 continuing narrative on enlarging human freedoms for all. Human development for everyone became the mantra to reach the unreached and to give voice to the voiceless. Uneven development took away the sheen from the progress achieved and deprivations posed a huge challenge to researchers and policy makers. Further digital revolution was feared to cause exclusion than inclusion despite the belief of democratisation of media. 'Broadband coverage and variations in access to computers and smartphones could generate new forms of exclusion' (HDR 2016, p.69). It reiterated access to information, Internet to avail the benefits of education, work, and political participation. Digital divide is believed to impede universalism calling for development for all. Universal Internet and free Wi-Fi assumed as means to increase opportunities and reduce inequalities everywhere integrating digital intervention in human development.

The migration of news from traditional to digital forms of communication in the world changed the emphasis of HDR to new forms of media expanding digital access to overcome or reduce deprivations. 'Voice and participation are intrinsically important, make instrumental contributions and play a constructive role in the human development approach' (HDR.2016, p.87). New media have helped activists to mobilize support of ordinary people who were

excluded from the development radar. New information technologies are facilitating participation through e-governance, online petitions, and blogging, giving unprecedented visibility to human problems. ‘The voice and accountability indicator is one of six aggregate governance indicators constructed by the World Bank to capture the dimensions of governance in a country— voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption’ (HDR 2016, p.98). The indicator measures, “the extent to which a country’s citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association and a free media.” (HDR 2016, p.98). It is being used in HDR as a measure since 2002 and estimates of freedom of expression and other variables are available for 214 countries. India’s performance in this indicator shows (Fig:1) a moderate ranking illustrating serious issues with freedom of expression despite having democratic polity and privately owned media.

**Fig1: Voice & Accountability Indicator measure for India 1996-2018**



*Note: Percentile rank among all countries (ranges from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest) rank)*

*Data Compilation for India based on –World Communication & Information Report 1999-2000*

Interestingly, it is pertinent to ask whether there is a link between Voice and accountability indicator and Human Development Index. A country with high HDI ranking ought to score high in Voice indicator and vice versa. However, when a country, for example, has high HDI score it indicates high on freedom of wellbeing but if it scores low in Voice and accountability index then it denotes low on freedom of participation – political freedom,

participation, and governance. A measure of complete assessment of development ought to be an integration of multiple indices including voice and accountability index.

Grey areas in development measuring tools have demonstrated repeatedly the consolidation of free media as an index.

## Conclusion

A review of Human Development Reports published in the last 25 years helps in understanding the changing perception of media and its pivotal role in measuring development. Globally, there have been many endeavors to measure Media freedom as a broad dimension for determining the media and political environment of different countries. However, organisations like the United Nations Development Programme, sole agency behind global annual Human Development Report of over 180 countries has perceived media as part of human freedoms—a comprehensive approach integrating civic participation, political freedom, free media, and freedom of speech and expression. Nevertheless, these initiatives focus on varied and complex dimensions and indicators of media. Measuring the immeasurable intangible issues of media and evolving criteria of international standards acceptable to all countries is the challenge one faces in studying media intervention in human development.

Today, HDI report has measures of other dimensions using IHDI – Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index, GDI – Gender Development Index, GII – Gender Inequality Index and MPI – Multidimensional Poverty Index. However, it has failed to evolve one key Media Index on par with other measures despite significant progress over recent years in initiatives to integrate media as a supplementary indicator.

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**N. Usha Rani** is an ICSSR Senior Professor Fellow in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Mysore, India.  
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