Platforms for Citizen Engagement: The Foundation of Democracy

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Building, nurturing and strengthening platforms that help citizens access information and hold functionaries accountable for their roles not only serve as an articulation of altruism but also facilitate greater transparency and accountability in public programmes

In recent times, whenever there is any talk about pro-poor development agendas, there is also a mention of ensuring transparency and accountability in the implementation of programmes. Whether it is in the context of policy objectives, programme guidelines, project plans or log frames, the intent of delivering transparency and accountability in governance is widely prevalent.

What do we mean by 'ensuring transparency and accountability in the implementation of public programmes'? Broadly, the intent of delivering transparency and accountability can be shown through the provision of platforms that facilitate citizens, as individuals and as collectives, to participate in governance. Transparency and accountability are an imperative component for any implementation structure's interaction with its beneficiaries, whether the former is represented by the State or by an NGO. It includes a bundle of measures that allows a pro-active disclosure of information and helps citizens to hold implementation structures accountable for their duties.

There are platforms built to serve this purpose and provide for mechanisms by which citizens:

a) Are informed pro-actively about details of the programmes being rolled out in their name and for their benefit such as entitlements, time-frame, reasonably expected outputs and outcomes, who is responsible for what, budgets and expenditure, decision-making processes and procedures for grievance redressal

b) Participate in the decision-making process viz-a-vis. planning, identifying beneficiaries and dividing resources

c) Review the performance of the implementation authorities and hold the latter accountable for the mandate they are supposed to deliver

d) Petition authorities on any grievances they may have in accessing services or benefits due to them

Experiments with embedding such platforms within the development practice in India have thrown up invaluable lessons. The accumulated knowledge gained from rolling out practices such as social audits, mandatory pro-active disclosures, use of IT platforms to allow transparency and accountability (citizens' forums for grievance redressal and tools for community monitoring within India) are a reflection of the democratic engagement in service delivery that few developing countries can boast of. However, experience has also taught us that for the above interventions to go beyond just a methodology and to actually serve as a means to empower citizens, certain fundamental conditions need to be fulfilled.

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ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Information is power and; therefore, its disclosure causes a rebalancing in the power equation between those who govern and those who are governed. It is only when people have access to what is recorded as fact that they are able to either accept it or confront it, on an equal basis, while engaging with the structures of power. Without equal information being available between the implementation structure and the beneficiaries, the perception of truth, as nurtured by those with access to records, is what prevails. Local realities will not be granted a chance for legitimacy.

In the context of development interventions, the provision of information should be just as necessary as the provision of the tangible 'benefit' that the intervention seeks to make available. People have a right to know the details of decisions, outputs and expenditure incurred in their name as much as they have a right to access the service being provided. Not sharing this information with them on an institutionalized basis is a reflection of the implementation authorities' lack of confidence in the beneficiaries' ability to understand it, and more importantly, corroborate it, thereby betraying a lack of trust in the foundation of democracy. The existence of legislation such as the Right to Information Act is an indication of the need for sharing information with the citizens as a matter of duty.

Development practice within India has tried, over the years, to share with the citizens, on a pro-active basis, information related to public programmes. For example, the Management

Information System (MIS) under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) lists details of all the works, workers and payments that take place under the programme on a real-time basis. It serves as a digital repository that provides citizens with both the disaggregated and the cumulative details of each worker employed under the programme and each rupee spent on the programme. End-to-end digitisation is not a new concept for public administration.

However, what sets the MGNREGS MIS apart is that all the processes and consequent expenditure are in the public domain, as backed by law. By sharing information, available traditionally only with the administrators, pro-actively with the public, MIS helps ordinary citizens to monitor the implementation of the programme and, thereby, gives teeth to the concept of constant public vigilance of public programmes. In doing so, MIS has also set standards for other rural development programmes to dedicate costs and attention to building similar online platforms for the mandatory disclosure of information.

However, even the presence of an expansive MIS has not been sufficient for the rural MGNREGA workers to use this information and demand accountability from the State. In this context, the need for moving from a MIS to a Janta Information System has gained momentum. The use of 'wall paintings' to disclose information for scrutiny by the beneficiaries is an effort in that direction.

Wall paintings refer to the painting of official records in physical places easily accessible by the community. Information displayed are details of the beneficiaries, the entitlements

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availed of by them, the expenditure incurred, the budgets sanctioned, the works that have taken place, etc.

Wall paintings have been used to disclose a range of information such as the waiting list of Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY) beneficiaries, the list of Below Poverty Line (BPL) card families, the list of pensioners and the amount of pension received by them, the rates and amounts of procurement of material used in the village, the list of households covered under a specific grant/project and the benefits received from it. The impact of sharing this information in local spaces where it can be read by citizens (who may or may not be the very same beneficiaries enlisted) has been tremendous. There is an almost instantaneous identification of ghost beneficiaries, of the incorrect inclusion of certain beneficiaries by excluding the more eligible beneficiaries, and of inflated rates and estimates. As an assessment method of what is going right and what is going wrong, based on people's feedback, wall paintings are far more accurate than months of 'independent evaluation'.

The practice of using wall paintings as a means of communication demonstrates the relevance of sharing information in a language and mode that is understood by citizens. It has also established the importance of identifying particular modes of information that are most relevant to the people and disclosing these in a simple manner so that the disclosure of information can have the desired effect. Mandatory disclosure of information should not be a mere requirement to be ticked off on a checklist for good governance. It is meant to show a culture of sensitivity and respect towards the people, who the development interventions are meant to serve.

Energy needs to be directed towards providing only information that is useful for people to assess and monitor the quality of implementation. For example, a disclosure of the amount of money spent in the entire State tells the villagers nothing. It is just a figure in the annual report of an agency. A disaggregated disclosure as per official records, however, of the list of women farmers, who have received benefits in the form of input seeds and trainings to become sustainable farmers in the village they reside in empowers the villagers tremendously. They are able to assess the veracity, the actual impact and success of the official data. Both forms of disclosure can be termed as compliance with transparency. But if the intent is to truly be transparent for the sake of greater equity in the distribution of information, the latter is what needs to be pursued.

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OPPORTUNITY FOR HEARING AND A PLATFORM FOR PARTICIPATION

One of the most important things that citizens in rural areas, trying to access services and goods under government schemes or NGO projects, need is a mechanism to register their grievances and a platform where they can be heard in a systematic manner. One of the most often-heard phrases in conversations with people who are seeking to claim basic services is, *"Kitne baar shikayat kiya hai, hamaara kaun sunta hai? (We've complained so many times; who listens to our complaints?)"*

The need for a platform, where people have the assurance that they can speak without fear and that their voice counts, is pivotal. Social audits, or *Jan Sunwais*, have been conducted for years in India for a range of matters such as MGNREGA, rural housing, old age pension, rural electrification, election spending and project reviews. Evidently, these are ineffective. Social audits serve as an institutionalized process through which citizens monitor the expenditure and the impact of public spending.

Through the platform of social audits, citizens are able to play a role in the on-going processes of an activity/project in each of its stages, that is, from planning to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Systematic citizen participation through social audits ensures that public spending is designed and implemented in a manner that is most suited to the local conditions and reflects the priorities and preferences of those affected by it. Most importantly, however, social audits serve as a platform by which people participate in the decision-making of the programme on an on-going basis.

PRESENCE OF COLLECTIVE PLATFORMS

Whatever be the mechanism for helping citizens access information and hold functionaries accountable for their roles, the need for these mechanisms to be accessible to collectives is essential. The consumption of information in the public domain by collectives of citizens adds much more strength than if this information is provided to a citizen one-on-one. The dynamism of people processing the information provided, clarifying the multiple interpretations of the information amongst themselves and arriving at a conclusion on the degree of veracity of the information in a collective forum is significantly more powerful. The disclosure of this information in a public forum, where it is accessible to groups of people together is also a great disincentive for wrong-doers or potential wrong-doers, for fear of the societal consequence of his or her wrong-doing surfacing.

Going beyond just the access of information, collective platforms also ensure fairness, and as far as possible, correctness of the information being presented, shared and registered in processes such as social audits and public hearings. Individuals find it difficult to fake details of their status of entitlement in the village vis-a-vis various schemes within a collective forum such as a social audit or a *gram sabha*. This may not be the case if the exchange of information was only between two individuals.

The strength of the social audit process rests on the collective ratification of the disclosure of findings arising from comparing official records with actual realities because it is put to the test of the wisdom of a larger collective. Similarly, the beneficiaries are able to muster the courage to confront the implementation structure with allegations of incorrect reporting of facts or denial of services much more strongly in a public forum, backed by a larger collective than they could ever have done in an individual exchange with the same.

However, the efficacy of this platform is definitely a function of how neutral the beneficiaries perceive it to be. An inclusive, transparent and neutral collective platform is the best way of ensuring that decisions are not only fair but also appear to be fair.

The presence of frameworks that promote transparency and accountability, embedded within the programmes is relevant and necessary. It is not an exercise that involves only a post-facto assessment of what went wrong. It is a framework that gives citizens their right to be involved in deciding how the interventions must be shaped, and to monitor

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whether these are in line with the intended objectives. Such platforms, which allow for the dissemination of information and receipt of feedback on any irregularities in the implementation, are intrinsic to the sustenance of a programme.

In the context of the need for 'evidence-based policy making', institutionalized platforms help further social accountability. These prove to be an important means of compelling the authorities responsible for implementing programmes, to acknowledge what is going wrong because it is an exercise rooted in evidence and not in mere accusations. These platforms, therefore, provide an opportunity to build systems through which shortcomings in service-delivery may be identified. The presentation of evidence makes it imperative for the government or other agencies, implementing programmes and projects, take corrective action.

This introduces and enhances the virtue of citizenship in a democracy, important because development can never be seen as divorced from the notion of citizenship. The building, nurturing and strengthening of platforms is fundamental to democracy. It not only serves as an articulation of altruism but also facilitates greater transparency and accountability in public programmes. The presence of mechanisms for transparency and public accountability is not a concept that can be ticked off in the list of things to be in place for the package of good governance. It has far greater potential. It enables democratic development and imbues a culture of civic equity that cannot be withdrawn once introduced.