

Design of e-governance projects for accountability: The Indian context

POLICY BRIEF

The nations of the world, including India, have widely accepted Social accountability as an objective to be achieved in the e-governance initiatives. Social accountability refers to an approach that relies on civic engagement in which citizens or civic society organizations participate either directly or indirectly in exacting accountability from government (World bank, 2005). The Indian Government has taken up several e-governance projects, some of them named Mission Mode Projects, which are ambitious and will be implemented across several states of India. Social accountability in the public service delivery depends on the extent of institutionalization of accountability norms, and the extent of awareness and participation of citizens. When the objective is citizen empowerment, shouldn't the design also be citizen-centric? Are the views and concerns of citizens being addressed in the design of e-governance projects? To understand this in the Indian context, the study analysed the design of Bhoomi, a land record computerization project of the Government of Karnataka state. It is considered one of the best implemented e-governance projects in India. The Indian Government is replicating Bhoomi for several states (Chawla and Bhatnagar, 2004). Land records are very crucial for protecting the rights of the legal owner, entitlement to bank loans, crop subsidies and crop insurance benefits and accuracy of crop data (Chawla and Bhatnagar, 2004). Bhoomi, thus has a critical role in serving the interests of the farming community and land owners and hence been chosen for the current study. The study aims at exploring the design practices used for Bhoomi. It attempts to address the larger question - How can accountability be built into the design of such mission mode e-governance projects? The study comes up with recommendations for a design that is in line with the social accountability objective.

KEY FINDINGS/RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Boundary crossing approach

Through the extended networks of socio-material relationships, identify the possible extensions for the design objectives.

4. Any unintended effects?

Identify the scope for unintended effects like privacy loss, exploitation of the system by vested interests and induce checks and balances through legislation.

2. Involve the Demand-side in the design process

Take the concerns and views of the all the target beneficiary groups, factoring in their heterogeneity.

5. Identify and reduce scope for tampering

The design intended to remove the scope for corruption shouldn't lead to other malpractices.

3. Evaluate the service delivery time

The project should reduce the time and effort of those seeking the services through it, in addition to reducing the processing time of the requests.

THE RESEARCH/ JUSTIFICATION

Design features of Bhoomi:

Bhoomi consists of the database of around 20 million land records which is used to produce the RTC (record of rights, tenancy and crops) document. The services offered are: providing RTC records to farmers and mutation requests (a system for logging the requests of land sale or transfer). Mutation is the legal process for change or transfer of ownership. Based on secondary data and earlier studies of Bhoomi, it was identified that the target beneficiary groups were heterogeneous, and that the design process did not include inputs from the target beneficiary groups (Prakash and De', 2007). The project does not cater to the concerns of several groups of landless farmers. The extent of citizen-centricity of the project thus becomes questionable. Earlier studies indicate that Bhoomi was built on the premise that

layering of technology can bring in accountability in the system. Also that the real-life contestations and constraints of caste, gender, feudalism and traditional exercises of power haven't been fully considered in the design (Thomas, 2009). The landless farmers never came under the purview of Bhoomi. In the design process there was no involvement of the target beneficiary groups of farmers and associated departments that could use Bhoomi. The design was based on 'partial knowledge' of requirements based on the feedback from select government personnel. Hence there was no holistic approach to ensure the common good of various target groups. The following instances illustrate the main functionalities of Bhoomi and the scope for improvement of design:

- **Issue of RTCs – the demand-side stakeholders were not considered in the design:** Feedback was collected from senior officials of the revenue department, so this was mainly a ‘supply-side’ involvement. The landless farmers never came under the purview of Bhoomi and couldn’t experience transparency in their transactions even after the land record process was reengineered.
- **Beneficiaries spending more time and effort to avail services:** The farmers need obtain a print out from the kiosk every time they need an RTC for purposes like obtaining a bank loan, etc. The actual transaction is happening between the revenue department and the bank. The farmer is made an indispensable part of the transaction, though the bank could have directly obtained the RTC from kiosk by using the farmer’s name. The farmer has to pay to the kiosk for RTC and also make an effort to submit the RTC to the bank.
- **Scope for tampering:** Workarounds can happen even in a computerized system. Some corrupt officials have tampered with the system and favoured certain customers pushing them ahead of others in the mutation queues (Prakash and De`,2007).
- **Unintended effects:** Anyone can use the name of the land owner or land survey number and obtain the RTC for the land parcel. Thus land agents can gain access to information easily. This also gave scope for faster mutations and inflation in land prices in sub-urban areas (Prakash and De`,2007).

These indicate that the design objectives were constrained by the limited views of the designer and the ‘partial knowledge’ of issues obtained from the feedback of select personnel (Suchman, 2002; Erikse`n, 2002).

Located accountability: In order to enhance the design process, the study applies the design approach of ‘located accountability’. Located accountability explains that one should be aware of the fact that one’s vision of the world is based on a partial perspective and that the awareness of this limitation should make one more responsible towards the system in which they are located (Suchman, 2002). Through boundary crossing, one should then try to understand the various socio-material relationships that exist outside their role and thus develop a holistic understanding of the requirements and concerns of various stakeholders. Such an understanding, according to the approach of located accountability, can be obtained by extended networks of relationships. One way of boundary crossing is to engage with citizens to understand their concerns and requirements. This can be appropriated to a social

accountability mechanism since it focuses on the ‘demand-side’ and helps promote responsiveness and accountability during the formulation, implementation and evaluation of the design objectives. Table-1 illustrates some design practices that can be adopted for Bhoomi through located accountability approach.

Table-1: **Design under ‘located accountability’**

Issue of RTCs: 1.Using Boundary-crossing approach identify the heterogeneous target user groups and other demand-side stakeholders like departments that can be linked to Bhoomi. Chalk down processes for the common good of all groups and special processes for groups such as landless farmers. Using the idea of ‘extended networks’, the stakeholder analysis reveals the various demand-side and supply-side stakeholders and the work relations between them. Understand the work relations among the users, VAs, land agents and revenue department and identify all possible effects both intended and unintended.

Mutation request:

Reduce scope for tampering:

Under this design approach the designers have to accept responsibility to understand and evaluate the design for possible chances for tampering and fix them. This needs the designers to look beyond the regular modes of transaction between the customer and officials, and identify all the forms of work that constitute the technical system.

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