Compendium of Best Practices on RTI

Volume 2.0

Government of India
Department of Personnel and Training
IR Division

DISCLAIMER

This compendium of best practices on implementation of RTI Act, 2005 is a compilation of write ups received from the public authorities and the citizens. This compendium is not a comprehensive overview of all the successful initiatives that are existing in India. It contains a few which have been brought to the notice of Department of Personnel and Training in response to the request by the Department.

Though editing and compilation of the write ups has been done by DoPT, the responsibility of the authenticity of the factual information contained in the write ups remains with the respective authors of the write ups.

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Web portal "dial.gov.in"
by Iqbal Hassan

Background

In India, which has a large population base with demographic, geographic, linguistic, cultural, socio-economic, and religious diversity, the implementation and delivery of welfare programs is one of the most arduous tasks for the government. The multiple sections of the society are served by the government agencies at the Central and the state level through their respective governance mechanisms. The Governments make special efforts to reach the marginalized sections of the society to bring them into the mainstream by providing targeted benefits through focused schemes and programmes.

Dial.gov Service is a common man's interface with the Government for information on welfare schemes and benefits which aims to bridge the existing gap between the benefit information and the beneficiary. It provides information to citizens about various welfare schemes and services provided by the Central and State Government, thus enabling the interested citizen to reach the welfare benefits based on his/ her eligibility through an intelligent search. The information about benefits is made available to the citizen through multiple access channels such as Dial.gov web portal, mobile application, an interactive voice response (IVR) service and contact centre helpdesk (Call Centre).

Although the information regarding most of the welfare schemes/benefits are available on the website of the concerned Departments, but still it is not easily accessible to the common citizens, as the targeted audience is not aware of the relevance of the particular information to him/her. Therefore the objective of the government to deliver the benefit to the

beneficiary may not meet due to lack of proper information delivery of the benefit available to the intended beneficiary. Hence, the dissemination of structured information of the available schemes/benefits and services at given instance becomes critically important which is the prime idea behind Dial.gov.

The software solution is developed and implemented by National Informatics Centre (NIC) under active monitoring by DeitY.

NIC has undertaken many projects in the field of ICT and Social arena with an aim to provide citizen centric services. The projects also constitute the Mission Mode Projects (MMPs) which have had huge nationwide impact. Apart from Dial.gov, some of the recent initiatives undertaken by NIC under Digital India programme:

- Mygov
- eSamiksha,
- Jeevan Parman
- Pragati
- eBAS,
- eVMS

Mygov -The citizen-centric platform empowers people to connect with the Government & contribute towards good governance. **Jeevan Pramaan** is a biometric enabled digital service for pensioners, eSamiksha - a real time, on-line system for monitoring of follow-up action on the decisions taken during the presentations made by different Ministries/Departments to the Prime Minister.

Need for a Single Window

Dial.gov is targeted to be a single point to get the information on all the government benefits & assistance programs and perceived as entry point for initiating the request. It provides personalized access and ease of navigation to all the citizens. It creates a more open and transparent government by ensuring that citizens can find the available benefits, assess their potential eligibility for those benefits, and determine the necessary steps to pursue service request in various public programs.

Objectives

- To provide trusted, timely, valuable government information and services as and when a citizen needs them.
- Enable the common man to access information on schemes and programmes at a single point
- Empower the common man by facilitating him in getting the benefits from the govt.
- Facilitate information delivery through multiple channels
- Structure information on benefits for simplicity and relevance to the common man
- Bring transparency in government functioning at each level
- Promote and strengthen e-governance, to create an area of excellence in G2C space, enhance transparency
- To adopt and improvise the best global practices in e-governance, mainly focusing on information dissemination in most user friendly manner.

Need for Dial.gov

The primary purpose of government is to bring welfare to its citizens. The Government makes special effort to reach the marginalized sections of the society to bring them into the mainstream by providing welfare

benefits through special schemes and programmes. However, there remains a large gap in the awareness of many beneficiary groups regarding these multiple schemes and benefits that they can avail. The conventional means of disseminating such information through advertising and websites are not adequate enough to make this information reach the targeted beneficiaries. Several reasons lead to this lack of awareness among citizens on what the government has for them:

- Lack of awareness in common man about their rights and privileges' as per their status
- Absence of an easily accessible and popular national level service for the masses
- Absence of an integrated information delivery channel
- Scattered and distributed information, which may not be accurately updated
- Lack of information about the various criteria required for eligibility for a particular scheme
- Lack of enforcement of policies for disseminating information
- Disconnect between ministries and intermediaries in modes of generating awareness
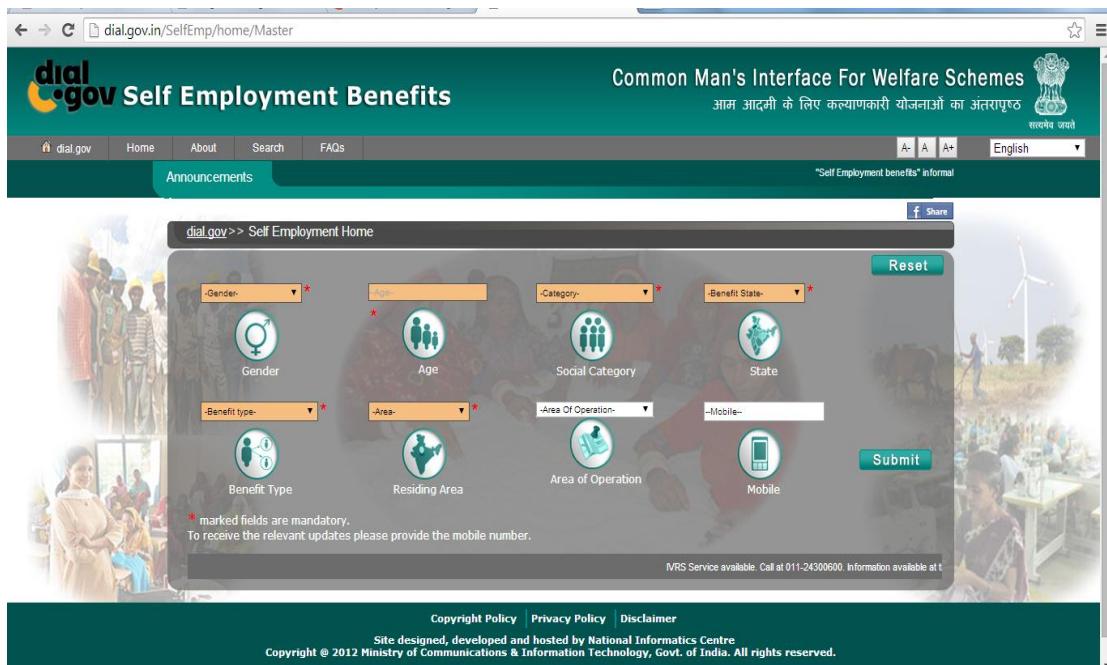
This unfulfilled gap in the awareness of the individuals at the grass root level needs to be addressed through creation of an information dissemination mechanism which can generate public interest and awareness.

If the above challenges can be resolved, then it would result in:

- Enhancement in availing the opportunities and benefits available to the common man
- Promote the government agenda of e-governance

- Increased access to better livelihoods through provision of basic facilities

- Increased awareness levels and encourage pursuit of further entitlements

- Citizen Empowerment

- Improve transparency in government functioning

Dial.gov: An intelligent and dedicated search engine for masses

Scope

Dial.gov facilitates intelligent search for welfare scheme and service benefits for the citizen with help of multiple access channels such as web portal, call centre, IVRS, and mobile app. It enables the citizens to search for the benefits information based on their eligibility. Currently the service is available in two categories like Individual and Group benefits. Scholarship, Pensions, Farmer, Women & Child, Sports, Youth, Self-Employment, Labour Benefits and Health Benefits are Individual benefits. Household and Culture benefits are under Group benefits. In these domains the benefits i.e. the information about the schemes and

benefits is being provided for individuals and group on the basis of the parameters given by them as input criteria.

New domains likely to be included in the Dial.gov group architecture are Natural Resource Management and Tourism etc.

Mechanisms for improvement on the delivery side are also being planned. In addition to Web Portal, Call Centre and Mobile application channels, the concept of hybrid IVRS will be implemented across states to improve the information service delivery with collaboration of IVRS and call centre capabilities. Additionally, the emphasis will be laid on public awareness and campaign to increase the visibility of Dial.gov and therefore, its usage.

Dial.gov has been envisioned as a single window for dissemination of information on schemes and services for the citizens of India. It shall be developed as a solution where a user can find useful information regarding any service, scheme or benefit. In addition to provide information regarding the eligibility conditions and details of the benefit associated, Dial.gov will act as Information Bridge between the benefit and beneficiary. The approach for this process shall be formulated in such a way that it does not overlap with any other such online service that delivers citizen centric solutions.

Therefore the scopes of Dial.gov will keep widening with greater information in seamless channels of delivery.

Financial Implications

Dial.gov is one of the core ICT initiatives of National Informatics Centre (NIC). The project was conceptualized and framed by NIC.

To instil minimum financial implications and maximum mileage, the promotion strategy of Dial.gov till now has been social media based. To limit the expenditure innovative methods of online publicity have been adopted like promotion through Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Storify and other Media Platforms.

In addition the websites and Portals of various national and state agencies are being used for disseminating awareness about the dial.gov platform for the public. This publicity mechanism as such is not creating any direct financial burden for popularising the services.

Also the NIC SMS gateway which is a low cost option for contacting the users is being put to active use.

Analysing from the Financial Benefits 'perspective, it is worth noting that Dial.gov provides information about over 1100 government schemes and over 1200 unique benefits approximately. Monetary benefits also form a major chunk of the benefits whose information is being disseminated through Dial.gov among others. Thus Dial.gov has numerous positive financial implications on the users in terms of benefits information delivery as the information details about number of monetary benefits like financial assistance, Loan, Subsidised Loans, subsidy on Schemes etc. is being disseminated through Dial.gov.

The major financial implication of the project is in terms of utilization of funds marked by for concerned authority for the given scheme/service benefit accruing to the citizen. It has been observed that many a time funds marked for a particular scheme are not utilised as the intended beneficiary don't come forward to claim them, though there is actually a need for such benefit available under the given scheme but lack of awareness due to communication gap keeps the potential users away. This

is also the prime reason for failure of many good schemes of government agencies which leads to improper utilisation of government funds and resources.

Deployment of Resources

The application is being managed by the experienced technical manpower of NIC. To ensure the smooth functionality with minimum downtime and 24 x 7 availability it is hosted in the Cloud environment, the technology working towards sharing of resources to achieve coherence and also focuses on maximizing the effectiveness of the shared resources.

Challenges & Learning during Implementation

In the current phase of the project, the new benefit domains are being added based on the analysis of the welfare schemes of the Government. The existing benefit domains are being updated with relevant and useful information regarding the welfare schemes. The core of the Dial.gov service is the information available regarding the various welfare benefits provided by the Government. The key task is to collect the updated, relevant and complete information regarding all the welfare schemes from the relevant Departments and structure and deliver the information in a beneficiary friendly manner through Dial.gov service.

To increase the usability of the Dial.gov service, some of the key areas of concern are to be addressed such as ambit of information to be delivered through Dial.gov service and its reach to the masses. To reach the masses, Dial.gov service should cater to common man and provide information about the services being delivered by the Government along with the welfare benefit information. As the ambit of the information under the Dial.gov will increase, the collection of information will become tougher. A robust mechanism for information collection, its verification and validation from the concerned Departments has to be set in place so that

the information is properly and timely fed into the Dial.gov information database. Once the information is collected, it has to be processed into rules which would then be utilized in delivery of the information service through the various information delivery channels of Dial.gov.in. The delivery channels such as Dial.gov web portal and the voice based channels like call centre and the IVRS need to be refurbished to make them attract more traffic in terms of hits and calls. Admin module has been prepared to enable the rule formation at various nodal points.

Some of the major challenges faced in taking the Dial.gov forward are as follows:

Difficulties in collecting scheme related benefit information
Updated and relevant Information collection is an important process in the project. In the long run, the relevance and usability of the information to the end user would ascertain success of the service. Collection of relevant information involves liaising with the Ministries / Departments, face to face interviews and interactions with key officials and regular follow ups. Given the current low levels of stakeholder buy-in, information collection poses a challenge to the project team.

Ministry / Department coordination for validation
After the scheme guidelines are sought from the respective Departments, rules are created and finalized (structuring of information). The created rules are then supposed to be validated by the respective Departments for thoroughness and sanity. This activity involves constant follow ups, which results in delay in meeting planned objectives.

Low awareness level
Reaching out to the masses is an equally important stream of activity that would be required to be carried out. Currently, the awareness of the Dial.gov service is very low among the masses. As a result, the transaction volumes are low across the developed access channels.

Positive Outcomes of such a practice in relation to RTI Act

Dial.gov is an ICT enabled project which aims at dissemination of social welfare information regarding various schemes of Central and State Governments through various access channels like Web Portal, Mobile Application, Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS) and Call Centre. Dial.gov project is conceptualized on an intelligent rule based search engine where the user is required to give certain basic personal details like Gender, Age, Area, Social Category etc. and then on the basis of the inputs given, the user is provided with the relevant schemes from the concerned domains on which the search was done. The information provided mainly consists of the Scheme name, benefit(s) associated with the scheme, eligibility conditions, monetary or other entitlements if any and additional conditions wherever applicable. In addition to this, the information is also provided (if available) regarding the Application Forms for scheme(s), Links available for filling online applications etc.

Synergy Link between the Dial.gov project and RTI Practice:

Government Perspective

The prime objective of the Government is to undertake the welfare of the citizens. Many projects are launched each year in various domains catering to Welfare of the Society at Central and State Level. India has a huge population of over 125 crores. Spreading awareness about the government programs that aim towards citizen welfare is a challenge that requires huge amount of investments A number of schemes comprising of numerous benefits are rolled out by different departments which aim to deliver the benefit/service to citizens under different categories. Dial.gov is a unique single gateway through which the different schemes and programs of the government are matched with the targeted beneficiaries scattered under different demographics. The rule based search engine has

been designed in such a way that the relevant scheme(s) information is shown when the search input is given via filling the various parameters and selection of attributes provided in each domain. So Dial.gov can aid more and more departments in dissemination of information by putting their information related data on Dial.gov after processing the given data according to the rule based search engine. Dial.gov encourages the concerned departments to share the citizen centric public information so that it can be disseminated through Dial.gov by formulation and addition of new domains to its information service.

Citizen Perspective

Citizens need to know about their rights and entitlements. Some sections of society have a reluctant mind set towards the government schemes and programs. This arises mainly due to lack of knowledge about the programs. People are not proactive to participate in public programs due to lack of information. Therefore empowerment of people with focussed information about such programs and schemes can help in generating public interest in the government initiatives. Thus Dial.gov is a unique source of getting information about the schemes, rights and entitlements by the people which are being provided by various departments. Therefore looking from the citizen perspective, Dial.gov helps users with the rightful information about scheme(s) and associated benefits based on their eligibility. In future, the ambit of Dial.gov shall increase with greater information services for the people and organizations thus aiming to serve the users as a single platform for seeking public information.

It can be concluded that Right to Information brings the information to the citizens regarding status of applications, grievance redresses, disclosures etc and Dial.gov disseminates public welfare information based on an intelligent search engine. Dial.gov brings the welfare

information to the users based on their eligibility and thus supports the overall objective of RTI which is Information dissemination to the public applicants. Similarly Dial.gov also synchronizes with the government departments as it broaches up the information about their programs and schemes. In a way Dial.gov streamlines with the government objective of greater transparency in public practices.

Scope of its replication in other public authorities

Dial.gov is a unique project that aims to bridge the gap between the benefit and the beneficiary by making the information about the benefit available to the beneficiary. Since its inception in 2012, the project has come a long way and multiple domains have been added to Dial.gov. This information service can be replicated in terms of adding information about the programs of new domains related to different public authorities in various public departments in an economic manner.

Dial.gov encourages that the other public authorities who are working in the public welfare domains and have adequate data/information which needs to be disseminated to the public can share the information related to their schemes and programs. This information can be processed appropriately and can subsequently be disseminated to the beneficiaries/users through the existing access channels of Dial.gov. The information is processed mainly in terms of Scheme Details, Benefit Entitlements, Benefit Eligibility and other additional conditions if any, in a feasible and economic manner. Therefore relevant information regarding any domain of public interest provided on the given parameters can be disseminated through Dial.gov. Thus, Dial.gov forms an information bridge between the benefit (Public Department) and the beneficiary (Citizens) which is a major contribution to the National e-governance Plan.

Public Agency: Mountain Children's Foundation (MCF)
by Aditi Kaur

Background

The Mountain Children's Foundation (MCF) has been working with children in rural mountain communities in the Indian state of Uttrakhand since 2002. The MCF taps the energy and idealism of a community's youth to bring about deep-rooted, organic change.

In the past 12 years we have built an extensive network of children within their villages in partnership with voluntary organizations deeply rooted in those communities. At the same time the MCF has worked to build trust and a sense of shared purpose between the young people, voluntary organizations, and various government entities.

Our work, the MCF has demonstrated that young people are powerful agents of change and development and one of the most effective forces for spreading information and awareness into local communities.

Based on our experience mobilizing children to address other issues in the community, the MCF believed it would be worthwhile to train young people about RTI and how to use it to improve their communities and discourage

corruption, and do so in a way that furthers interaction and cooperation between the community and the government.

We believed this effort would enable the children to learn about government schemes and resources available to their community and that the adults in the community would be more inclined to submit an RTI if the children could help them understand the details of filling in the application. But we had no idea that the children's RTI applications would result in roads and bridges being built, electricity restored, teachers appointed to schools and so much more. Problems that had lingered for years were resolved in a matter of weeks with a single RTI.

While the essentials of the RTI Act and the process for filing an information request can probably be conveyed in a few hours, integrating RTI into the civic life of the community—so that people actually use it—took considerable training and effort.

Need

According to the Uttrakhand RTI Commission, until 2008, the RTI was very little used in the state. The few RTI applications that were submitted came largely from urban areas and usually related to grievances from government employees, such as checking on the status of a transfer or pension. RTI awareness was practically nonexistent among the general public, especially in rural areas. And the few individuals who had heard of the law lacked

information on how to use it to address their own concerns, or those of their community.

In most villages the children who are studying in school are often first-generation learners. Their parents do not know how to read and write and therefore rely on the young people to help them assimilate new information and understand new concepts. As a result, the young people are one of the most effective forces for spreading information and awareness into local communities. We hoped that by teaching children about the RTI, they could use the Act to learn about programs and schemes their children's groups could tap into as well as teach the adults in their community about the RTI Act and how to use it.

Project description

Beginning in 2008 the MCF conducted out a two year-long RTI awareness campaign across the state of Uttrakhand. This was carried out in partnership with 21 local NGOs1 to build RTI awareness among the 12 to 18 year old youth population in rural Uttrakhand.

The program included state level workshops for the children and training for the facilitators from the partner organizations. Through these workshops, training capsules and programs, RTI awareness was disseminated across the State. The MCF also created Hindi-language brochures explaining in simple steps the processes involved in filing an RTI application and getting a response. Thus in the short span of two years the MCF had managed to reach out to 179 village communities across all thirteen districts of the State, generating awareness about RTI in 7759 children and 500 adults.

Each year's campaign started with a training for one facilitator from each of our partner organizations, followed by a state-level workshop that was attended by

children from each of the communities in which it was to be carried out, facilitators from our NGO partners, and officials from the State Information Commission.

The MCF then worked with its partner organizations to hold village-level workshops for the young people in each community. During these workshops, enlivened by games, group discussions, and other activities, the children came to understand the RTI process in great detail, while also learning about their civic rights and responsibilities.

The methodology used enabled MCF to run the project with the minimal staff: Four part-time employees and one volunteer from MCF, aided by a local facilitator nominated by the partner organizations. Thus MCF leveraged the existing resources available with well-established partner NGOs that were already well established in the communities they were operating in. The village-level workshops were held in schools or panchayat buildings, thus making use of existing infrastructure.

The results were soon there for all to see. By 2014 the children had been responsible for filing 942 RTI applications that were entirely to do with issues that affected the community. The biggest boost to the RTI movement came when communities began seeing everyday problems of access to electricity, water, presence of teachers and other facilities in schools, repair of roads and public works, through the mere filing of a RTI application.

The entire process adopted by the MCF along with the resulting success stories, is now well documented and available to all through, PABAM, the MCF's monthly magazine for children, as well as on the MCF website.

Lessons and Best Practices

1. **Working with the adolescent youth was critical to MCF's success.** This is a segment of India's youth population that, despite being a powerful force for communication and awareness generation, has been largely ignored in most programs. Young people are not motivated by concerns of "how will this benefit me?" and are even less concerned about "will anyone be angry with me?" This is group that is driven by idealism and, given the right information and tools, is far more likely to use the RTI to try to solve problems that affect the entire community rather than only using it for personal benefit.

   The youth have also been found to be very effective at teaching adults in their community about the RTI – far more so than any one-time training or workshop for the adults would have been. This was particularly true once the children's RTI requests started bearing fruit and the adults saw unresolved problems pending for years being addressed within a few weeks or months. The children came forward to assist adults who could not read or write, to prepare and submit their RTI application.

2. **Advantage of detailed and practical training:** Under the MCF's holistic approach, RTI training was imparted to the children during a workshop in which they first learned about the concepts of "rights and responsibilities" and then were shown how the "right to information" was one their rights as citizens of India. They were given a detailed training on the RTI process – from how to file an information request to what happens when the RTI reaches the government office and how they can appeal if the response is not satisfactory. The children were then divided into groups and asked to think about the problems observed in their community and whether and how they could use the RTI to get

information to address these problems. Towards the end of each workshop each of the children was asked to frame an RTI about one of the problems they had identified. The workshop facilitators reviewed each application and worked with the participant to refine it and ensure that the questions were phrased in the way that would get the most productive response.

3. **On-going support and facilitation:** Because the MCF worked with local NGO partners to whom it provided extensive training on the RTI process, local organizations developed the capacity to support the children in writing and submitting their RTIs as well as dealing up with any follow up questions or problems. The few attempts made to harass some RTI applicants were immediately quashed with the help of the partner organizations. The MCF head-office, in turn, provided a great deal of support to the partner organizations, answering their questions, contacting the Information Commission and Chief Information Officer, etc. Facilitators also took great pains to make sure children and partner organizations involved in the training understood that the RTI was not to be used frivolously or to harass people or to settle personal scores.

4. **Far reaching consequences at minimal cost:** By working with existing grassroots organizations in the community and leveraging their existing infrastructure and the relationships they had established in the communities where they worked, the MCF was able to carry out this campaign with far more impact and at far less expense than if it had tried to create its own infrastructure in all those remote areas. In addition the MCF also created collaboration among grassroots organizations that otherwise often saw one another as competitors.

5. **The need for safeguards:** To protect the children from possible retribution, trainers urged them to refrain from making RTI requests against those who have the power to retaliate or cause them problems, such as their own teachers or their village pradhaan. They were also told that if an RTI affecting their school or village panchayat was really necessary, they should bring it to the notice of the partner organization or the MCF office which would then take it upon itself to file the RTI so that the child was safe and free of blame. The children were also urged to use the RTI responsibly and not as a tool to settle scores or temporary peeves.

6. **The effectiveness of a broad-based campaign:** We believe the impact and effectiveness of the program was greatly enhanced by the fact that it was spread across so many communities and so many children were involved. The success of one community helped feed the enthusiasm of another. And the participants were able to support one another. For example, in one village, a child questioned how often the ANM was supposed to visit the village. (In that community, the ANMs had stopped going to the villages and told people to come to the ANM centre instead.) When the ANM found out who had submitted the query she started scolding that child for causing her trouble. In response, the MCF partner organization in that area submitted the same query from multiple villages, so that the ANM realized it would be better for her to change her own ways than to try to silence the children.

The MCF promoted the RTI work being done at the grassroots through its magazine, *PABAM*, which allowed children from one community to learn about the success of others. This significantly increased the project's momentum and reach. In addition, the MCF was able to get some media publicity, both in the press and TV, that further increased awareness of

the children's successes, which both encouraged the children and promoted awareness of the RTI.

7. **A strong, supportive RTI Commission:** The MCF program would not have succeeded but for the support extended by the office of the Chief Information Commissioner for Uttrakhand, Dr R.S Tolia. He and other information commissioners participated in MCF state level workshops, lending important authority and credibility to the effort. Initially when some expressed some misgivings about the rights of children to file a RTI, it was the then - CIC Dr. R.S Tolia who unequivocally stated that children did indeed have the right to file an RTI request. The CIC support lent enormous weight to the program. And later, when children encountered government officials who told them they could not file RTIs, they were able to confidently point to Dr. Tolia's statements.

8. **Importance of training and follow up:** While many RTI requests resulted in immediate, tangible changes, there were also numerous cases in which the response from the government was incomplete or evasive. In our first year, we realized that many unsatisfactory RTI responses that should have been appealed had not been. In the second year, we increased training and support for this part of the process and saw several successful appeals that resulted in better information and more accountability.

We also found that momentum around the RTI dropped off once our campaign ended. Although our partner organizations, the children, and the community were very excited about the changes they brought about with the RTI, without the financial support from the MCF for an RTI facilitator in each organization, the number of RTI dwindled. Therefore it

is important to have a permanent trained facilitator in each area or organization.

9. **State-wide visibility and outreach:** The MCF's state level workshops provided an important state-wide visibility and outreach for the effort, while also providing children from remote communities to meet in person and share their experiences and success stories. In addition, the Information Commission provided another valuable outreach tool by sending their RTI OB van to the communities in which the MCF had conducted the RTI campaign so the people there could talk directly to the

Positive Outcome

Over the past few years, 942 RTI applications were submitted and over 95% answers were received from the different departments. The few answers that were not received were because the address was wrong.

Just as important as the actual RTI results was the impact this had on the community. The adults saw the young people taking on and solving problems they had thought were insurmountable and it shook up the very nature of governance in those communities as local officials realized they could be held accountable by the people. The success of their efforts is even more remarkable given that the children come from rural mountain communities with few resources. Most of their mothers work at home and in the fields and their fathers have jobs at the village and block level. All the children in this program live in villages.

This project has affected the communities across the board (we've heard many cases of local officials promising to hear out and address the children's concerns so they don't have to file an RTI) and we are hopeful that government bureaucrats will not be quite so arrogant or so corrupt in as they realize that the people have a way to hold them accountable. But the most powerful impact has been on the young people. They have seen, in the most real and tangible way possible, that with courage and action they can bring about dramatic changes and solve longstanding problems. We believe that they will not follow in the passive footsteps of their elders, but rather see themselves as active, empowered members of the community who can and should have a say in its circumstances and development.

Some of our success stories include

1. In a remote village in Teri, the only teacher at the primary school attended only 10 days in a month, despite living in the same village. Though the villagers had complained for years to no avail, an RTI by a student at the inter-college immediately brought 12 officials from the block office to the village. They first tried to intimidate the children by saying that they could not file an RTI, but when the children showed them the MCF materials that clearly stated they could, the officials went to the school. There they found the teacher again absent. They summoned

him and rebuked him before the entire village and also sent a letter demanding he open the school every day. Since then the school has been functioning far better.

2. Across the state, RTI requests from various communities resulted in water and power being restored or voltage being improved.

3. Numerous schools received new teachers following RTI requests from the children. In some cases those positions had been unfilled for months or years.

Scope for Replication

We believe the MCF's success could very easily be replicated by following the best practices listed above. However, it cannot be achieved by parachuting into a community, dropping off some materials or providing a one-time training on the RTI process. Trust between the community and the facilitators who teach them about the RTI is essential. The facilitators need to be locally based so they can provide ongoing support, including answering questions and troubleshooting. Working with the community's young people is, perhaps, the most powerful way to introduce new ideas. And the idealism and natural tendency to rebelliousness of youth is perfectly suited to the RTI.

Carrying out a broad-based campaign is also powerful in building momentum, as people are inspired by the success of others to attempt their own RTI requests.

The MCF is happy to share its techniques and the brochure, poster and other materials it created for promoting RTI awareness, as well as for its model of child-focused development. The MCF has already provided training to a number of organizations and has a training module prepared for better understanding of RTI by the children and their facilitators.

RTI on Wheels- reaching the un-reached communities through mobile RTI Clinic
by Pankti Jog

Background

RTI Act was passed in 2005. This act has resulted as victory of uncommon struggle of the common people with slogan "Hum Janenge Hum Jiyenge" (We will know, we will live), and "Hamara Paisa Hamara Hisab" (Our money our accounts).

To get such a progressive legislation to be enacted needs lots of consistent efforts and patience. However, much more efforts and patience is required to take the law to the common citizens, make them learn about it. RTI is empowerment of common citizen with information, which in turn enhance their participation in the democratic process. Mere seeking of information from the government leads to increase in its accountability towards people. Thus is utmost necessary that this act reaches to the marginalized communities whose voice is yet to be heard, who do not get citizenry rights and who feel themselves helpless in the situation.

Details of the practice

RTI on Wheels is joint initiative of **JANPATH**, Mahiti Adhikar Gujarat Pahel (MAGP) and Association for India's Development (AID) to spreading RTI faster and effectively

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RTI on Wheels is multimedia vehicle (mini bus) developed to be used as mobile RTI Clinic at door steps. It has three compartments, the driver's cabin, an office space and the display area. The office space consists of RTI library, office set up, laptop, internet, fax, printer, while display area consist of wide screen television, Projector, public address system, monitor, Audio-visual library, refrigerator, and storage space for publications.

RTI on Wheels has three power options, solar, battery, and through generator set. All together give power back up of 8 to 10 hours. Its pack up time is also very less. Operation can be handled by two people. The appearance of RTI on Wheels is very unique and attractive, and easily catches attention of people. It also creates "Brand Identity for RTI".

Outreach Programmes is the main strategy used for awareness generation and mobilization. Such a programme is conducted on location like bus stand, Milk collection centre, haat day (in tribal areas), Civil Hospitals, government offices, folk fairs etc. We choose suitable time so that maximum people can be contacted in minimum time.

For conducting effective outreach Programme, RTI on Wheels stands at the chosen locations at chosen time. Display area is opened. RTI song, RTI success stories are screened using multimedia. RTI publications/literature like pamphlets, books, user manuals, sample applications, GRs, important circulars is displayed on the platform formed by the flap that opens for film screening. Volunteers, with the help of microphone, address the crowd gathered, while the other volunteer distributes the pamphlets.

On an average within a span of 30 to 40 minutes, it reaches to 200 people. People share their experiences of using RTI if any. After short interaction is over, people come forward to draft applications. Third volunteer seats in the office area and helps drafting applications. In tribal or interior areas, if people insist, we also help them to file RTI applications. Depending on the locations, the crowd gathered, and issues raised RTI on wheels disseminates information pro-actively about schemes, programmes, provisions, which falls into Pro-active disclosure Category. Using internet, pro-active disclosures about MGNREGA, or beneficiaries of IAY, or details of PDS ration is displayed on the spot. Disclosures create lots of discussions, and few RTI applications or complaints are filed there and then.

RTI pamphlets distributed during outreach Programme held RTI helpline no, which runs from 11:00 am to 6pm to give guidance. This helpline becomes very useful for citizens as they can contact us for guidance, any time in future.

When issue is complex, or affecting larger public, people approach RTI Legal Clinic that is run on every Saturday, between 4 to 6 pm. Handholding of citizen is necessary to build their confidence, and motivate them to use RTI as tool of transparency, accountability and ultimately moving towards "Good Governance".

Interestingly, even public authorities invite RTI on Wheels as it has found to be very effective media of disseminating vital information from section 4(1) b. that fall such outreach Programs are scheduled at public authorities too.

RTI on Wheels co-ordination and networking efforts:

RTI on wheels can accommodate 3-4 volunteers and had facilities of night stay, including of women volunteers. Thus vehicle conducts long –run tours ranging from 10 to 30 days. Such a campaign creates lot of impact in terms of improving implementation of RTI. In order to make maximum use of RTI on Wheels, film screening (on village issues) is done at night in villages followed by questions-answers.

RTI on wheels visits the public authorities and interacts with them. Local CBOs, women groups are motivated to join, and address the gathering. Local dialect and presence of local person helps in mobilizing people to share their views & problems.

Section 4, 26 of RTI act says about using media for creating awareness about RTI provisions, government programmes. RTI on Wheels can become effective, low cost media for the same.

Case Study: *RTI on Wheels was returning from J&K. On its way, Near Nagal Chaudhary block, Mahendragadh district, of Haryana, we found road block and people were arguing with one another. When we got down and inquire, we came to know that, entire issue is about injustice done in water distribution to one village against another.*

We explained them how RTI can be useful to seek accounts of money spend on water distribution, and decision making procedure. For first few minutes, people were very angry, but slo they found RTI relevant.

RTI applications were drafted on the spotand BDO was requested to visit the spot for accepting the information. Before people file these application JE- water supply reached the spot and immediately announced the water supply, and also assured that bore well will be dug within two weeks. People did not file application but decided to wait for two weeks. People, Sarpanch, and police thanked RTI on Wheels for facilitating this dialogue, which otherwise would have led to issue of law and order. When issue was resolved we left for Ahmedabad and reached on 3rd evening.

RTI on Wheel's reach and Impact:

- RTI on Wheels has till date travelled over 4.2 lakh kms in various states. It has conducted 10,200 outreach Programmes, directly reached to around 5600 villages conducted 2300 film screenings, & has reached approximately 85 lakh population in various states.

- RTI helpline has responded 2.76 lakh calls till date and Saturday legal clinic has handled 9300 cases.

RTI on Wheels model is replicable, as this it be tried out in different vehicles like temp traveller, Sumo Jeep etc, depending on availability of resources. It can be handled with two people including driver, who works as "Paral Legal worker".

Scope for replication

- ➢ Meghalaya government has already developed three RTI on Wheels for conducting RTI awareness programmes to reach out to Naga, Garo and Khasi tribes

- ➢ Gujarat Government has also purchased two vehicles to develop RTI on Wheels. We have not kept any "copy right for the designs of RTI on Wheels" and share them free of any cost.
- ➢ RTI on Wheels now has taken a mission of RTI Bharat Yatra to conduct tour across the country, to learn and share about best practices. Bharat Yatra has begun from J& K since June2014, and in next 2-3 years will visit each of the states.

MAGP has demonstrated a successful model of mobile RTI clinic – RTI on Wheels taking RTI to grass roots through innovative approach & have left this idea open to be adopted and developed by each state ultimately to achieve the mission of "Reaching the Un-reached.

Writing on the Wall: Experience in rural Gujarat
by Suchismita Goswami

Background

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organisation, mandated to ensure the practical realisation of human rights in the Commonwealth.

CHRI strongly promotes people's right to information (RTI) as a key measure underpinning robust democracy, rapid development, good governance and the effective realisation of human rights. Openness increases accountability and transparency, promotes consultation, allows informed choices and reduces corruption. Activities that have been important for CHRI include extensive research and publications, engaging policy-makers, like parliamentarians, lawyers, media, civil society - building capacity, and larger public education, analysing draft RTI bills, creating alliances with other organisations to campaign for access to information legislation in tune with international best practice, and auditing the implementation of legislation.

Need felt

CHRI is instrumental in the drafting and implementation of Right to Information Act, 2005 in India. CHRI further believed that the RTI law should impose on government to routinely and proactively disseminate information of general relevance to citizens, including updates about structure, norms and functioning of public bodies, the document they hold, their finances, activities and any opportunities for consultation. They have taken up different initiatives to strengthen this belief. Under the Indian RTI Act the whole Section 4 talks about proactive disclosure. The essence of Act lies in holding the public information officer to actively disclose, publish and disseminate as widely as possible all the issues which are of general public interest even when a specific RTI request is not filled for the same.

Problems faced by the citizens

In the Indian context it is seen that the general public most of the time have minimum capacity to seek information and are not even aware of all the information that are under government's possession. This is because the maximum population of India is unlettered, lives under below poverty line and stays in rural areas it was very difficult to think about a means to reach out necessary information to all. A democracy can only function when all the citizens are participating in it equally at all levels. Participation can only be ensured when people get adequate information. Due to lack of proper free flowing of information most of the time the government schemes are not implemented successfully and rampant corruption takes place by government officials.

Problems faced by government officials

On the other hand the Panchayat officials in remote areas were also uncertain as how to share the vast information present with them to the public. The officers were hard pressed to supply all the information to all the people who come to them to get every kind of request. Poor and anxious people come from miles away to know about the criteria and other details for every service, the officers have to repeat themselves, it is difficult to get the information out and at times and which leads to corruption.

In general parlance it is noticed that the government is mostly restricted to internet and websites for proactive disclosure. This practice is important but should not be the only means for proactive disclosure as the internet penetration in India is currently a little more than 12%. In order to reach out to the poor and the illiterate population in the country the disclosure should be made which is easily accessible to the public, cost effective, in local language and in available in various forums.

Details of such practice

A unique means that was developed by CHRI along with Nagarik Adhikar Kendra in Gujrat started the initiative of dispersing information by doing simple wall painting in local language to promote proactive disclosure. CHRI and NAK have worked together since 2005 to endorse knowledge and use of the Right to Information Act, 2005. In NAK a small group of young activist combined the knowledge of RTI to seek transparency in the district level administration. In the year 2008 NAK along with CHRI came out with a publication on a survey conducted to access the compliance selected public authorities with the RTI Act at the district and sub district level in Panchmahal district. As a follow up intervention to improve the quality of proactive disclosure NAK went to the communities to determine the kind of information that would be useful for them and accordingly developed simple templates for disclosing information in the areas of service delivery such as health, education, PDS and implementation of the rural employment guarantee law. As discussed before it was found that most of the villagers specially women were unschooled so the school going children helped them in making sense of the wall painting and also used traditional

Learning from this experience CHRI along with other civil society contributed in a consultative process initiated by Department of Personnel and Training in developing guidelines last year for implementing Section 4 of the Right to Information Act, 2005. The first set of guidelines those where issued by DoPT were aimed to guide the public authorities in making the disclosures more systematic in nature and would also lead to reduction in the formal requests for information. The second set of guidelines focus on practical guidelines for disclosing information about crucial social development programmes at the State level. These will be applicable from the village panchayat level up to the Secretariat level in each State. The DoPT has specifically addressed a letter to the Chief Secretaries seeking their involvement in the use of these guidelines to implement the proactive disclosure obligations of public authorities under the RTI Act.

Wall Paintings on Government Buildings

Lessons learnt/ Positive outcome:
Simple and practical steps to disseminate information can be initiated in the lowest tier of the governance. The whole exercise was very cost effective and simple in nature. No extra expenditure was incurred as all the walls inside and outside of government building was used to disclose information through wall painting.

The information that is proactively disclosed should be relevant, updated, clear and published in local language. The information should be published in consultation with the local people like it was done in Malav panchayat. The needs that were identified by the people that they needed information on stood out to be details of the government schemes that the villagers are dependent on. The budget, information about the point person, list of beneficiaries and the important dates for application were disclosed as recommended by the community.
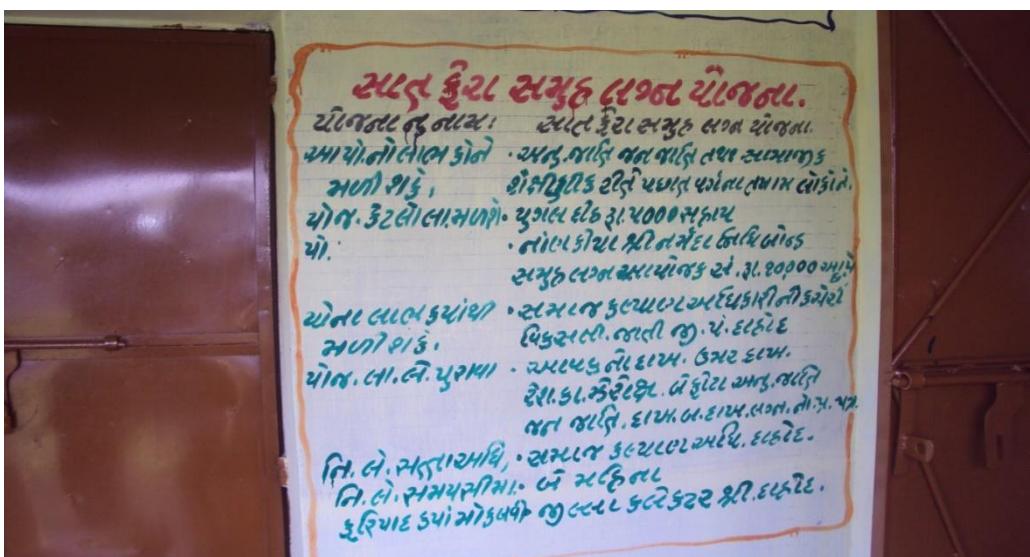
The community should be motivated about the usefulness of the RTI Act. They should be consulted on the types of information they want to be proactively disclosed and the different department from where they want the information. It is important to involve the community as otherwise the sustainability of the campaign would not be possible. The community should feel the need for information and demand the government in the local level from time to time about updated information.

The information painted in the wall should not be passive information. Old information should be replaced by new and updated information. The sustainability is ensured only with active participation from the community. As the information's disclosed are disclosed through wall painting so at given point of time it could be replaced by new information. Information that got a life of very short span and needs to be updated regularly should be written in chalk and board.

The information Commissioner and the other government officials should be kept on board to ensure that the panchayats are monitored and given essential support whenever needed. When the Malav experience was successful on proactive disclosure the Information Commissioner himself encouraged the

other districts to replicate it and referred it as model village to government officials and other CSO's.

Demand for information increased: RTI became relevant and popular among the people in Malav and it sporadically spread across the neighbouring districts also. The people came to know about their rights and pursued it further from the administration for relevant information. Number of success stories came out after the campaign on citizens who unearthed information on corruption and human rights issues. As the whole campaign was citizen driven not much money was spent. Within two weeks Malav panchayat was able to paint out the relevant information. The citizens also took part in the initiative.

Scope of replication:

The initiative can be replicated easily in other panchayats also for ensuring spreading of essential information in the remotest corner in the country and among the most deprived people. There is a need of strong will and support from the local government and information commissioner for replication in other areas. A local organisation or a citizen group should be identified who would survey out the information through participation in village assemblies about the kind of information that is demanded by the people. Those identified information should be put up on the walls of the government buildings.

The bigger challenge lies in sustaining the trend of proactive disclosure and publishing of information regularly on these public platforms. The information disclosed through wall painting should not be one time initiative. The community should create demand to monitor that the information is updated regularly and put up through wall painting. This initiative is successful only when community involvement and participation is taken into account in the planning and preparatory stage.

The cost incurred is also very low in this venture as the primary cost involves in the purchase of paints and brushes.

SOCIAL AUDIT - A platform to uphold the rights of the people

by Ms. Sowmya Kidambi & Ms. Kavitha Srinivasan

Background

Society for Social Audit Accountability and Transparency (SSAAT) is a registered society set up to conduct social audit in Andhra Pradesh. Its vision is to uphold the rights of the people and concept of eternal vigilance by the people; facilitated by social activists and the state government acting in conjunction to achieve the same.

Originally social audit was operationalised by establishing Strategy and Performance Innovation Unit (SPIU-RD) with effect from 2006 in co-ordination with CGG with financial support from DFID as part of DISA Programme. The said DISA Programme wound up on 31.3.2009. Consequent on closure of SPIU under the DFID programme, to continue the Social Audit in NREGS an exclusive wing was created under NREGS. Accordingly, Govt. has issued orders for the formation of an independent and autonomous body viz., Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency(SSAAT) which will be independent of the mainstream administrative machinery and shall be responsible for facilitating the conduct of the social audit by the rural poor vide G.O. Ms.No:155 PR & RD (RD II) Dept. Dt.13.5.2009.

Social Audit: A need of both the people and the administrators
People:

The two important laws of recent times, as per its definition, is a right-based, demand- driven public empowerment programme which changed the manner in which the public perceive the administrative machinery.

Right to Information ACT, 2005 ,An Act to provide for setting out the practical regime of right to information for citizens to secure access to information under the control of public authorities, in order to promote transparency and accountability in the working of every public authority, the constitution of a Central Information Commission and State Information Commissions and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee ACT, 2005, an act to provide for the enhancement of the livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. These two historical acts of the Parliament of India is the result of the social movement which grew out of the demand of minimum wage for workers in which hundred activists' organisations struggled for years. The outcome is the provision of Section 17 in the MGNREG Act which mandates gram sabhas to conduct social audit. The clause allows the citizens to ensure public accountability and to promote collective responsibility and awareness about entitlements.

Administration

Despite recent rhetoric of transparency, rarely has any government proactively disseminated information of expenditure in a demystified and simplified manner. Governments have, by and large, concentrated on large-scale issues without really focusing on micro-management aspects, as a result of which targeting, accountability and transparency have remained weak in development programmes. People have certainly not been consulted or asked, nor their feedback sought on a continual basis.

Though in many states, Management Information System (MIS) is in place, it is not adequate for the administrators to get a real picture at the grass roots level and to address grievance of the beneficiaries' in time. Two persistent senior

officers of the Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh along with founding social audit organisation and activists in the year 2006 put a step forward to learn and to make social audit an integral part of the peoples' lives.

Need Felt/Problem faced

The challenge at that point was a series of 'WHO, WHERE and HOW? The act mandates Gram Sabha to conduct social audit and in a Gram Panchayat, there are around 3,000 voters. So the question that lay in front of the people was a huge question mark.

Overcoming the Challenges

Therefore to overcome these challenges, under Administrative Reform Action plan, Strategies Performance Innovations Unit (SPIU) headed by an IAS officer, an initiative was taken up in 2006 and began social audits in three districts of AP. Gradually, in three phases, all the 22 districts came under the ambit of social audit. It was then revamped and emerged an independent and autonomous Society (SSAAT), which is separate from implementation machinery, free of supervisory and vigilance roles. The process of social audit would be one of objective i.e., evidence based. Social auditors are mandated to follow strict code of conduct for conduct of social audit.

Details of the social audit practice in Andhra Pradesh- Social Audit of MGNREGS

Social audit is a democratic process that ensures public accountability of agencies through a systemic demand of information by the community in response to the works/programmes that have already been implemented by the government or other agencies for that particular area/community.

In a social audit, the people and the Government jointly monitor the project. It brings on board the perceptions and knowledge of the people, involves people

in the task of verification and also brings about much greater acceptability of the government,

The Imperatives of the Process

Social audit is a tool for empowerment of the stake holders, not a fault finding mission. The main component of the process is full access to all information prior to social audit, with enough time for assimilation and verification by the social auditors. As it is a combined effort of the people and the Government, it is the obligation on officials to be present and answer queries at the public hearing. Social audit is primarily dependent on People's participation, which is dependent on an enabling atmosphere to have a positive outcome. The outcomes must have legally sanctioned implications.

A. Dissemination of the information

Since the inception of social audits in AP, social auditors used to file an RTI application to access records before they began the process of verification at the village level. This was the most laborious and time consuming part of the SA process. In many a places there would be a huge delay and auditors were forced to either wait for days together or change the action plan. The section 4 of the RTI Act deals with proactive disclosure of the information by the public authorities. It states that every public authority should provide as much information suo moto as possible to the public through various means of communication so that the public take minimum resort to the use of the Act to obtain information.

In 2010, the Government of Andhra Pradesh adopted the method of proactive disclosure of information of MGNREGS scheme, thus displaying a strong commitment to transparency. It is one of the first few States to put in place extensive systems for digitising records in a consistent manner and at a faster pace. The data captured is real time transaction based Management

Information System (MIS), which is hosted in public domain. Information provided in the department website is of two kinds: administrators facing and citizens facing. The digitised information is made accessible to the social audit team, so that they get the records in time at one place.

B. Verification of records with facts on the ground

Social audit at the gram panchayats duly facilitated by the SSAAT resource persons- Village Social Auditors belonging to that mandal strive towards providing the beneficiaries/communities right to access information and verify the veracity of the same with ground realities. It is to be kept in mind, that even in States like AP; the data hosted in public domain, does not always reflect all the captured data. For example, the actual date of disbursement of wages to the labourers, muster roll number against each labourer with work details, etc. During the process the social auditors perform door-to- door verification and also create awareness on the wage seekers' rights and entitlements under the Act. Gram Sabha is conducted at the end of the verification Process in the GP in the presence of an independent observer who is not part of the implementing agency.

C. Gram Sabha & Public Hearing

As a culmination of the social audit process, on a pre-notified date a Social Audit public meeting is held at the mandal level.   Public, concerned officials,   political representatives, media participate in the meeting. Village wise SA findings are read out and citizens testify in the hearing. The reports are written in a simpler way so that the communities understand easily. A senior level district official from the implementing agency is present in the public hearing. The Officer answers queries and announces the action taken publicly. Corrective action is taken immediately. The state social audit rules ensure the outcomes must have legally sanctioned implications. Follow-up is ensured

within 15 days by a separate Vigilance wing headed by a Chief Vigilance Officer (CVO).

D. The social audit report

The social audit report and action taken report is hosted on the SSAAT website for public disclosure.

Closing the loop- Initiatives of Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh & SSAAT

a) Chief Vigilance Office (CVO)

Follow-Up Action - The Independent Vigilance Wing in the RD Commissionerate headed by the Chief Vigilance Officer initiates action on the Social Audit findings and ensures that follow-up action is taken in time. The Chief Vigilance Office (CVO) has representatives at the District level headed by District Vigilance Officers drawn mainly from the Revenue Department.

b) Mobile Courts

The passage of Andhra Pradesh Promotion of Social Audit & Prevention of Corrupt Practices Act, 2012 (APPSA&PCP Act) gave tremendous courage to the wage seekers, Village Social Auditors and restored the faith of the rural citizens in the social audit process. As envisaged in the APPSA&PCP Act, 2012, Govt. in GO. Ms.No. 19, Law (LA & J-Home-Courts-C) Dept., Dt.21.2.2012 have created Eight Special Mobile Courts in the State to try the offences committed by persons indulging in corrupt practices during implementation of Government Schemes and Programmes including those as brought out by Social Audit and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. At present one Special Mobile Court is functioning covering two Districts i.e. Medak and Karimnagar, which is taking up the cases of the

persons involved in irregularities/ misappropriations under MGNREG Scheme basing on Social Audit reports.

c) Chief Quality Control Office (CQCO)

The biggest challenge the social auditors have to face every time at the field level is the constant questioning by the field staff of the implementing agency about their abilities to verify the material intensive works. Therefore in order to overcome this challenge an independent CQCO wing has been set up so that the engineers and the social auditors jointly inspect the material intensive works.

d) In-house Capacity Building & Training wing

A strong foundation was laid since the initial days of social audit in Andhra Pradesh by accommodating social activists from various civil society organisations. The spirit of activism is instilled among them from the beginning 'Our money; Our Accounts'. Few local activist personnel of Social audit motivated the literate youths from the labourers' family/community to be trained in the nuances of social audit and work as Village social Auditors. The best of the VSAs are absorbed into SSAAT as resource persons. Gradually the resource base was increased to the present number. It is this interesting combination of activists and youth from the community which keeps the spirit alive. To create an enabling and fearless atmosphere to conduct social audit at the gram panchayat, handholding is very important. Therefore training the VSAs, developing new strategies to adapt to the dynamic situations from time to time is of utmost importance. SSAAT has collaborated with AMR-APARD wherein all the trainings, schedule, resource persons, training modules and films are developed and handled by the Capacity building wing of SSAAT and logistics support is given by APARD. Trainings are given centrally once in six months at Hyderabad and regularly at the field level by master trainers and team leaders.

e) Synergy between SSAAT and Accountant General's Office:

CAG could do a Section 4 compliance Audit and give recommendations regarding proactive dissemination of information. Social audit reports and financial audit reports in AP are feeding into each other & strengthening each other. The financial audit is now opening up space to incorporate people's views like social audit does. SA processes are being drawn upon by the CAG for performance, quality and people's access to their entitlements. CAG is being requested to promote standards of social audit that goes beyond being a tool for good governance but addresses peoples' rights and protects them. SSAAT has conducted orientation trainings and workshops for the AGs in the social audit process.

Resources for Implementation: Manpower:

It has 960 resource persons working full time as resource persons and social auditors. Till date SSAAT resource persons have trained around 80,000 Village Social Auditors. To support the field functionaries and the social audit process a full-fledged support system like the Capacity building, Administration, Accounts, Human Resource and Information Technology section is also spaced in the SSAAT office.

Infrastructure

A head office is set up in a government owned building in Hyderabad. This office space serves the need for all 22 districts and takes care of the SSAAT personnel, who work towards conducting social audit seamlessly in Andhra Pradesh. While the printing of social audit booklets and training materials, transportation of records, data entry & its software development, data analysis, developing and maintaining website are taken up through a private agency

Funds

0.5% of the total NREGA fund is earmarked for conducting social audits vide G.O.Ms.No.153 PR & RD (RD II) Department Dated.12.05.2009.

Scope of Replication

SSAAT conducts social audits in all 22 districts of Andhra Pradesh. It has extended its work to audit schemes such as social Security Pensions (SSP), Aam Aadmi bima Yojana (AABY) , Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP) and has also taken up the social audit of the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY), Mid-Day meals on a pilot basis in two districts in Andhra Pradesh. SSAAT has trained over 20 states on social audit as per the request of the MoRD. The SA process in Andhra has now been advocated as a role model for other states by the MoRD, GOI. Also MoHRD, GOI has requested SSAAT to conduct pilot social audits in nine other states in order to build a model institution in the respective states.

Outcome of proactive disclosure of information and interactive platform: Data Analysis of the impact of social audit -

So far six rounds of SA have taken place across all 1085 blocks covering 22,000 gram panchayats. Each month there are approximately 7000-8000 financial issues and

10000-12000 non- financial issues (mostly grievances). This is roughly about 17000-20000 issues that the system has to deal with. The data also reveals that nearly 23 Crore (230 million) has been recovered from 250 Crores worth of financial fraud found.

Conclusion

The average cost of a SA per gram panchayat is between Rs 5000 to 10,000 (inclusive of establishment costs), based on the Andhra experience. However, the impact of the SA (read as returns) have been many and cannot be measured purely in monetary terms, if the analysis illustrated above is anything to go by.

It's a process that not just identifies social, procedural and financial lapses, but also has a huge deterrent impact and ensures that the programme doesn't slip into the hands of contractors/middlemen. It is also a tool of empowerment that goes beyond the boundaries of what any traditional financial audit has been able to establish so far.

Lessons learnt by the public authorities concerned during implementation:

- The analysis shows that no official MIS or monitoring and evaluation report captures the gaps, leakages, strengths and a weakness of a programme like a social audit does.

- Transparency and accountability are made an intrinsic part of governance.

- Placing information in the public domain and an open discussion by all stakeholders on various aspects cleanses the programme and allows for correction.

- Andhra Pradesh was also the first state to pass social audit rules. Based on these, and in concurrence with the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, central rules for social audit were framed and notified on 30 June 2011.

- In spite of a constitutionally mandated people's forum (gram sabha), individual beneficiaries rarely have a platform where they could express their views or air grievances. A strong grievance redress mechanism is put in place by the Government of AP, especially for the MGNREGS wage seekers.

- The administration has always been viewed by the people not with distrust, but as an ally, an amorphous body which is far too intimidating for the poor to approach. The SA process of the MGNREGA in Andhra Pradesh has changed some of those equations and, therefore, emerged as a powerful tool in the hands of the citizen.

e- Jaalakam – a bridge connecting common man and RTI

by Dr. Nirmala Padmanabhan

Background

e- Jaalakam is a model e- Governance literacy project aimed at enhancing the capability of citizens, particularly girls and women, to benefit from various e- Governance initiatives and thereby become active participants in an e- society. It focuses on online access of useful services of the Government; such as downloading birth, marriage and death certificates, online tracking of case status in high courts, availing RTI facility, tracking files in Government office, checking status of Aadhar card, ration card, electoral roll etc.

Need felt / problem faced which led to adoption of e- Jaalakam project

Emergence of New Public Management has brought about a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of citizens from passive recipients of public services to customers, clients, citizens and subjects who deserve efficient delivery of services. This was facilitated by development of Information and Communication Technology and e-Governance which marked a shift in the concept of governance from process centricity to citizen centricity. Many states in India are implementing a myriad of e-Governance projects aimed at improving public service delivery, bringing greater transparency in government processes and ensuring more effective accountability. Correspondingly, there is an increasing need being felt for wider and deeper participation of and engagement with all stakeholders especially general public at large to promote citizen centricity. This necessarily involves creating awareness in service seekers to use the new tools of service delivery. Such initiatives also have the potential to open windows of governance to women, physically handicapped and other segments of population whose restrictions on mobility largely exclude them from the purview of easy access to public services.

e- Governance holds immense potential for women in Kerala who reveal a gender paradox with exceptional achievements on traditional measures of development like literacy, health parameters and Gender Development Index but trail behind in direct measures of autonomy including household decision making, mobility and control over money. Kerala ranks 10th among 25 states in women's participation in household decision making revealing that academic achievements in the state are often not transmitted into decision making. Thus it is being increasingly realized that what the state needs are programmes aimed at gender empowerment in decision making and participation. In response to such needs the Department of Economics in St. Teresa's college which has a long history in women's empowerment and education launched e-Jaalakam project in 2012 to empower girl students and promote their inclusion in governance. The project initially focused primarily on women since it is observed that men at some stage or the other do access many of the services from various government offices and local bodies. On the other hand most women get bogged down with family obligations, lack of time, social and physical constraints on mobility and entrust such matters completely to male family members. Since e-Governance opens critical windows of opportunity for promoting their inclusion, initiatives were needed to take these services to women. Hence in its initial phases, the project focused on them. However, in due course it was realised that males are also, in general, largely ignorant of e-Governance initiatives and hence now the project addresses all segments of population.

Details of e- Jaalakam project

Evolutionary phases

e-Jaalakam project evolved overtime, through multiple phases and a process of learning by doing, to the citizen engagement movement that it is at present.

Phase I – Genesis of e Jaalakam (Sept. 2012 - June 2013)
The genesis of e-Jaalakam involved a series of sub phases which included

a)   A workshop on e-Governance

b)   Assessment of awareness of e-Governance services among students

c)   Trial awareness sessions in St. Teresa's College

d)   Workshop on e-Governance

a) **A workshop on e-GovernanceOnce** : The idea of initiating a project on e-Governance gained acceptance, the immediate challenges were to - 1) find resources to fund a training programme 2) develop content for a hitherto untried course and 3) identify resource persons willing to venture into this untrodden area. The solution for the former came in the form of a small sponsorship from Kerala State IT Mission. In the case of the latter, State e-Governance Mission Team, Kerala, magnanimously agreed to put in the extra mile to chart specific course content. Consequently a two day workshop on e-Governance was conducted in the college on 19 and 20 September, 2012   during which 20 volunteers pursuing their first year bachelors program in economics were groomed to be e-Governance Master Trainers.

b) **Assessment of awareness of e-Governance services:** Newly generated awareness of award winning e-Governance projects such as Sevana - civil registration, led the department to undertake some research on its

implementation in the state in general which in turn revealed that despite its wide implementation and success in registration, (99% of civil registrations in the state is reported to take place through Sevana) very few people had accessed the certificates online. For instance while 5,25,185 and 5,22,345 birth registrations had taken place in 2011 and 2012 respectively, corresponding number of downloads were 11,037 and 11,222 indicating that public awareness and use of these services was abysmally low. Simultaneously a small study was undertaken to assess awareness of e-Governance among a sample of 70 students studying in first year bachelors programmes in varied disciplines in St. Teresa's College. Students from our institution were chosen for the study based on the assumption that, being an A grade institution located in the heart of Kochi city, students from here would have greater access to and awareness of computers and internet compared to their rural counterparts. Analysis of response of the sample students indicated that 83.70% of them had access to computers and internet connection but were using the net only for social networking, entertainment and educational purposes. These findings indicated that public awareness and access of e Governance services was indeed rather low as a consequence of which their full potential remain unutilized even in a state like Kerala which is much acclaimed for its high general literacy and award winning programmes on computer literacy like Akshaya and IT@school.

c) **Trial Awareness Sessions:** These findings prompted the department to organize trail awareness sessions for the faculty and around 300 fellow students in the campus, feedback from whom indicated that it was indeed a very useful programme. This imparted confidence to venture into the next phase and the subsequent six months were spent learning to access greater number of online government sites and services. Doubts regarding varied schemes under Social Justice Department, District Industries Centre etc: and methods of access in the case of Aaadhar, e- District etc. were clarified by

student visits to concerned offices in Ernakulam district. Since such a search identified a large number of sites, the challenge was to pick and choose relevant ones which would succeed in capturing the interest of the public and motivate them to access. The tactic utilized to address this was adoption of a life cycle approach. Thus a databank of relevant governance sites was prepared so as to include important online services/ information women might generally need in their lifetime and these were arranged in a life cycle pattern from birth to death. An e-Jaalakam pamphlet was also prepared which furnished the URL of more than 100 relevant websites.

Phase-II- -Campus to Community Phase of e-Jaalakam and launch of Vivara Nidhi- A Citizen's handbook on e- Governance (July - Dec 2013)

During the second phase – (C2C) campus to community phase, the group of student master trainers shared their databank with various civic groups in Ernakulam district through training sessions. Sessions were organized for diverse civic groups which included both genders, dissimilar age clusters and varied social groups in Ernakulam District including higher secondary students belonging to both Kerala State and Central Board streams, undergraduate and research students, professionals, housewives and even elected representatives of local bodies. During these sessions, the databank was introduced to them and access of a few strategic services demonstrated. A total of 945 people were covered through thirteen sessions over a period of six months ranging from July to December 2013.

Feedback was collected from a sample of 100 persons from among them so as to study the impact of the project. They were asked to rate the e- Jaalakam databank using a three scale rating. Out of the 100 participants, 60 % reported that they found it very useful while the remaining 40% rated it useful.

Participants were also asked a question on what percentage of information provided in the databank was new to them. In this connection, they were asked to choose between five categories of values ranging from 0-100%. 40% of respondents stated that above 80% of the information presented was unknown to them, another 29% reported 60-80 % was new knowledge while 27% considered 20-24% of content in e Jaalakam to be new .Only 4% of the participants knew more than 80% of the content of the databank in turn reiterating public ignorance about e- governance initiatives,

A significant suggestion that came up from many adult citizens during the training sessions was that since need for access was not frequent, they were liable to forget what was demonstrated. They thus requested written instructions which could be used as and when required. This led to design and publication of Vivara Nidhi – A Citizen's handbook on e- Governance which which literally handholds the public in their efforts to access 23 core e-governance services by detailing the various steps one has to follow in accessing these in a simple flow chart form which even a layman could follow easily.. The services are arranged in a lifecycle pattern from birth to death enabling access according to requirements at various stages of life. Training sessions in which a few sample handbooks were circulated was reported to be much more useful than ones which used only the databank and pamphlet.

Another relevant point observed during sessions was that services of immediate use to students such as scholarships, driving license, Aaadhar card, railway ticket booking etc kindled greater interest in the younger age group compared to services like filing income tax, payment of property tax etc. which are usually needed in later stages of the life cycle.
 Incorporation of this feedback led to launch of phase three

Phase three incorporated following major changes

a) Preparation of a handbook for students

b) e- Jaalakam@School- which scaled up the programme to cover schools in Ernakulam Educational district

c) Emergence of a citizen engagement group

a) e- Mithram- Student specific handbook

Comprehension that a universal tool was not suitable for people belonging to different age groups led to design of a separate handbook for high/ higher secondary school students which included only services which could kindle their interest. The assumption underlying such a downsizing and restructuring was that once student's attention is captured and they get familiarized with mode of access of some services, such experience would automatically encourage accessing additional services as and when the necessity arises.

b) e- Jaalakam@School - Pilot Project in Scaling Up

A major constraint of the strategy followed in phase two was that awareness generation had been based on training sessions for diverse civic groups organized by undergraduate student volunteers from the department of economics during their holidays/ free time. Such an approach imposed serious constraints on the area and extent of coverage. A wider reaches out and sustainability warranted a different plan of action. The solution visualized was integration with a much acclaimed project in Kerala namely IT@School which has a well-established network of operations throughout the state. A joint venture between St. Teresa's College and Regional

Resource Centre, IT@School, Ernakulam District was initiated to launch a pilot project to educate 12, 000 students studying in class ten in around 85 Government and aided schools in Ernakulam District in January 2014.

c) Emergence of a citizen engagement group

While Vivara Nidhi the citizen's handbook was in general rated as very useful, some citizens opined that a handbook in the local language would be acceptable to the large majority of the general public as compared to the English version that we had prepared. Correspondingly an attempt was made to meet this public demand during which it was observed that only around three - five of the twenty three services outlined in the handbook had Webpages in Malayalam while all others had only an English interface. Surprisingly, despite Kerala having one of the highest enrolment in Aaadhar in India, the website was noted to have an option of many languages such as English, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali - but not Malayalam. Thereupon, the department of Economics took on the task of citizen engagement in the true sense of the term where the demands of the public were communicated to the Government. Letters communicating this citizen need were dispatched to concerned ministries in Kerala. Thus the project facilitated gradual transformation of citizens from mere acceptors of services to demand generators who strive to influence the type and quality of services.

The department also took on the role of a citizen watch group that would keep abreast of latest e-Governance services launched by Kerala Government, profile the mode of access in simple terms and make it available to the public. For instance, when the new public portal for e- District was launched the handbook was updated to incorporate the changes.

a) **ToT**- In its fourth phases, the e-Jaalakam team has emerged as an expert group which provides **Training of Trainers** through workshops for various organizations from different strata of society. The team is thus providing technical support for the 'e-Governance for Good Governance' project initiated by NSS Technical Cell, Kerala and workshops are being held in different zones in Tirur, Kollam and Kozhikode to create State level e-Governance Master Trainers who in turn will impart their literacy to the general public. Linkage with a well established network like National Service Scheme will ensure coverage of larger segments of the population. Workshops were also conducted for Kudumbashree volunteers who are currently running / interested in setting up Akshaya common service centres in Kerala. Training in high income earning services like filing of Income Tax returns and application for passport were in greater demand amongst this group since it would increase the economic viability of the service centres

b) **Updated English and Local language Version of Vivara Nidhi -**Citizen's also raised queries regarding method of online application of RTI, method of making online payment using credit/ debit card etc. Thus Vivara Nidhi was updated and second edition brought out which met such demands from the public as well as included later developments like introduction of State Service Delivery Gateway.

c) **Scaling up of the project**- Reach out of Vivara Nidhi was widened through linkage with a number of connected networks apart from NSS. Thus it is

being disseminated across Nasscom Kerala Network, ICT Academy Kerala members and is a reference material for the Total e- Literacy Project being implemented in Kerala by PN Panickar Foundation. The citizen engagement tools are currently uploaded on a few sites where it is freely accessible to all.

1)   e- Jaalakam website **www.ejaalakam.in**

2)   The Knowledge Repository of National e- Governance Division, Department of Electronics and IT, Govt of India **https://www.negp.gov.in/repository/repository_result.php?flag=1&st=13&key=0**

3)   Kerala State IT Mission**. www.itmission.kerala.gov.in**

Phase V- e- jaalakam audio video CD-January -2015 onwards

This phase seeks to further simplify the process of access to the common man by preparing short audio- video clippings on the process of access of varied services including availing of RTI facility. These are proposed to be uploaded on U tube where it can be accessed by all. These will also be compiled in a single CD which will be used in TOT programmes.

Scope, financial implications, and deployment of resources such as manpower, infrastructure etc.

The scope of the project is extensive since it covers a spectrum of e-Governance services offered by both central and state Governments. It compiles information scattered across various webpages/ sites and focuses on citizen's lifecycle thereby enhancing clarity on what are the varied services available online for a common man to meet his needs at different stages of life

A unique feature of the project is that it was implemented primarily with Non-Government funds mobilised through CSR/ sponsorship routes. Apart from the initial small funding of Kerala State IT Mission for organising a two day workshop in 2012, it was funded primarily from other sources.

Further the project was successful in motivating youth power to take up the cause of spreading e- Governance literacy. Initially it depended on voluntary manpower of under graduate students in St. Teresa's College but later also expanded to include the services of IT@School staff and now linkage with NSS technical cell further utilises the manpower resources of one of the most dedicated student organisation in India.

Lessons learnt during implementation of e- Jaalakam.

During the course of implementation, the following lessons were learnt by the team

a. Potential benefits of many e- Governance services to citizens remain unrealized due to lack of public awareness and capability to access these

b. The gender divide or age divide often cited in a digital world was not apparent in access of e- governance due to the fact that all were generally ignorant about these initiatives.

c. Public have a keen interest in learning such initiatives since they perceive benefits to themselves

d. Citizen engagement tools which demystify method of access and inspire confidence have inherent potential in promoting citizen participation in services

e. Different engagement tools need to be designed to meet the needs of diverse age and social groups

f. Availability of web pages and engagement tools in local language will go a long way in increasing usage of e- governance services

Positive outcome of such practice in the implementation of the RTI Act.

RTI ACT attains its true objective of promoting accountable, responsible Governance only when the facility of RTI is utilised by all needed persons in the country. To encourage wide usage by anyone, anytime, anywhere in India, the Government has offered online facility for application of RTI. However the larger chunk of people in India, even educated people, remain largely ignorant of such facilities and perceive the process of application as a cumbersome one to be done at a centralised office. Even the few who know it can be done online do not often use the online facility due to apprehensions about exact method of usage. The project apart from making people aware about RTI also encourages its wider usage through demonstrating the exact process of usage in very simple

flow chart forms and audio video clippings. Design of such simplifying tools in both English and Malayalam ensures utility to all strata of society. Thus it is expected to encourage greater awareness and usage of the facility to meet the needs of general public rather than being used only by the enlightened few

Scope of its replication in other Public Authorities

The project holds immense potential for replication by other public authorities/ states. The services covered can be further expanded to include other services and can also be replicated across different states. It is currently under consideration by NeGD for replication in various Universities across the country.

Conclusion
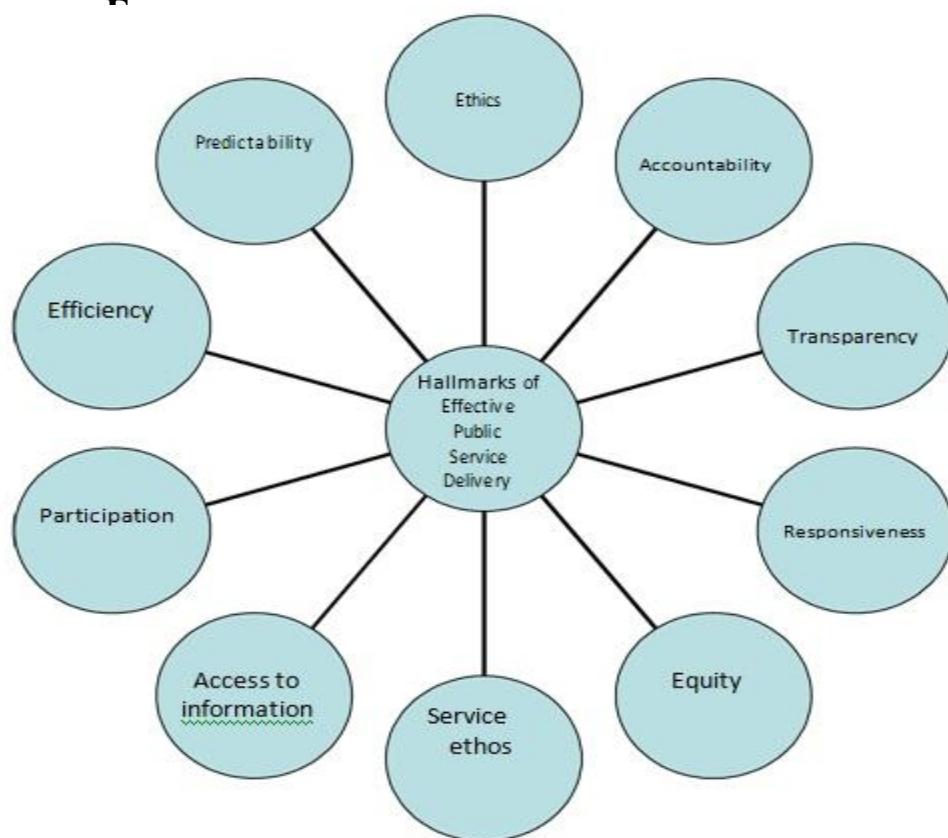
The evolution and wide acceptance of the project reflects a fundamental truth that simple ideas can have a huge impact if they have utility for human beings. It is classic example of the saying that even a small pebble can cause huge ripples in still waters. The introduction of a simple handbook and other citizen engagement tools into a society which is largely ignorant about the existence and mode of access of various e Governance initiatives created a ripple of interest and public acceptance. The very strength of the project lies in the fact that it simplifies the process of access and boosts public confidence. It changes citizen's perception towards e-Governance from an "I don't know" mode to "I can" which is a significant step towards realization of the benefits of e-Governance

E-governance in Hamirpur District(HP)
by Abhishek Jain, IAS
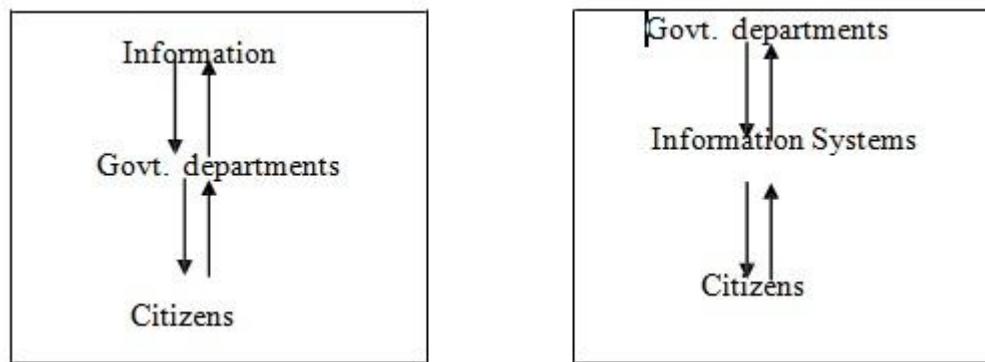
Background

E-governance is a very important tool to enhance the reach and utility of Right to Information. There is a great deal of public dissatisfaction with the functioning of the government and at all levels which is perceived to be very inefficient, ineffective and non-responsive to the information needs of the citizens. There are complex procedures and lack of transparency everywhere. Information is a very essential hallmark effective public service delivery mechanism. (Fig.1)

lmarks of Effective Public Service Delivery

There is lack of information not only about the various government schemes and procedures, but even about Right to Information Act also. So a new way of interacting with the government without having to go to any government office was envisaged in the present initiatives as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Information system before (left) and after (right) implementation

Objectives of the initiatives taken in Hamirpur (Himachal Pradesh)

- Reduce physical G2C interface
- Improve G2C interface
- Reduction in effective cost to users
- Equal access of information to everybody
- G2C services on 24x7 basis
- Citizen Service Process Re-engineering

Details of the practices

Initiatives taken in Himachal Pradesh to integrate E-governance into Right to Information

While efforts have been made at the national and state levels to implement RTI in conjunction with E-Governance, it is the cutting edge levels of governance which are most critical for ensuring the success of RTI. Certain initiatives were pioneered by the author where the strategy for implementing RTI was through E-Governance (Figure 3). The ultimate aim was to improve

the information regime and information retrieval system for easier access to the citizens.

Figure 3 – RTI Strategy

RTI initiatives in district Hamirpur (HP)

Various initiatives were taken in Hamirpur district to promote Right to Information using multi-mode approach including -

- Manual or physical form
- Touch Screen Kiosks
- Web-enabled G2C RTI services
- m-enabled RTI usage through SMS gateway

The following initiatives were taken making Hamirpur 100% RTI compliant district horizontally (among various departments at the district level) and vertically (from district to the village level) -

RTI Centers

- RTI Centers have been set up at all levels of the administrative machinery in the district – from top (district) to bottom (village).

- The RTI Centers are self-contained centers of information providing information to the citizens about almost every government activity done through that level. Additionally, they possess RTI Act, Rules & Regulations (both English & Hindi), RTI forms, Directory of PIOs, APIOs and Appellate Authorities, RTI user handbooks – both for public and government staff.

- Computerised DISPLAY BOARDS have been put up mentioning the procedure, formalities, fees etc. for every public service and government activity from the district to the sub-divisional to the tehsil and panchayat level.

- District RTI Center

- Sub-divisional RTI Center – done in all 4 subdivisions

State Chief Information Commisioner looking at the Information Boards at one Sub-divisional RTI Centre

- Tehsil RTI Center – done in all 7 Tehsils/Sub-Tehsils

- Block RTI Center – done in all 6 Blocks

- Panchayat RTI Center – done in all 229 Panchayats

- Village RTI Center – set up in all 198 revenue village offices. It contains pro- active disclosure of all relevant information to public – procedures for getting work done from Patwarkhanas, fees schedule, details about revenue works etc; compilation of RTI Act, Rules & Regulations; RTI Forms; Directory of PIOs, APIOs & Appellate Authorities; RTI User Handbooks etc.

e-SOOCHNA' Kiosks

Hamirpur becomes the first district of the state where 'e-Soochna' kiosks have been set up at the Sub-divisional levels. Bhoranj SDM office became the first SDM office in the Himachal Pradesh to establish a Sub-divisional e-Soochna kiosk when it was inaugurated by the Hon'ble Education Minister, H.P.

'e-Soochna' seeks to provide various kinds of useful and important information to the citizens through a user friendly Touch Screen Kiosk. The kiosk can be visited by the citizens on any working day to obtain useful information about a multitude of government schemes, programmes, progress and other important information. The various information which can be accessed are main statistical data of Hamirpur district, various development schemes of Government of H.P. and Govt. of India, information about Right to Information Act, waiting list of Indira Awas Yojana etc. *An important feature of 'e-Soochna' kiosk is that uptodate status of implementation of various development schemes in every panchayat can also be seen along with its head, sanctioned amount, present status etc.* Information reg. PIOs, APIOs, Appellate Authorities, Voluntary disclosure documents, RTI

application forms etc. can also be accessed through the kiosk. e-Soochna kiosks is also web-enabled. Information is available in both English and Hindi.

Systems have been kept in place for continuous updation of data every 15 days. A dedicated IT employee has been kept for doing the same, under the overall supervision of District Informatics Officer. Feedback mechanisms have also been kept for getting knowledge from the citizens about what further kinds of information they would like to have.

Citizen using e-Soochna kiosk

It has been observed that the common applicants face problem even in finding out the names and addresses etc. of the PIOs and Appellate Authorities – both of the State government and the Central government. And even if these information are published outside an office, one has to go physically to each and every office. The problem compounds where the applicants stay far away – even in other districts and states. Therefore, a Directory of

PIOs, APIOs and Appellate Authorities – both State government and Central government - compiled and published which was *released by Hon'ble Chief Minister of HP.* The Directory contains phone numbers also of the various public authorities. The e-RTI Directory put on website, and also on the E-Soochna kiosks. The RTI Directory kept in all government offices, Panchayatghars, Patwarkhanas etc. of the district. It has been published both in English and Hindi.

e-RTI Register

The RTI Register for Appellate Authority was made web-enabled. Complete details of the various RTI cases/appeals were put in the Register including the current

status of the cases. The Register was being maintained both manually and electronically.

m-RTI

In Hamirpur, m-Governance is being utilized for providing information to the applicants about the status of their applications/appeal, and information about the readiness of the information is provided to the applicants through SMS gateway on their mobiles.

- Special thrust on pro-active disclosures.
- Various kinds of user groups prepared.
- Push SMSs being sent as soon as information is ready or the applicant is to be informed about date of hearings or addl. Fees etc.
- Latest updates sent through Group user groups.

Online RTI access

The RTI implementation in Hamirpur district has been made web-enabled as various kinds of information including the status of RTI appeals, RTI Directory, RTI Act/Rules, list of PIOs etc. and the pro-active disclosure documents all have been made online.

RTI Boards in all Panchayats and Patwar offices

Display Boards giving information about RTI Act and the PIOs, APIOs and Appellate Authorities have been put up in all the 229 Panchayat offices and 197 Patwarkhanas of the district along with the telephone numbers. Ensured the setting up of Display Boards of RTI in 100% offices of the district.

E-Court and Integrated Case filing & Monitoring System: Implemented at District and all 4 Sub-divisional levels.

Audit of Pro-Active disclosures done in all the government departments of the district.

Compilation of RTI Act, Rules & Regulations – Book containing the RTI Act, amended Rules and Regulations – both in English and Hindi - has been published and circulated among all the government offices, Panchayat offices and Patwar khanas of the district.

Public Awareness generation Public awareness on RTI is being generated through various workshops, capacity building programmes etc.

Debate/Declamation contests were organized in various colleges and schools. Radio Talks were delivered to increase awareness on RTI among the rural masses. Capacity building, awareness generation, multi-stakeholders consultations etc, done for having more stakeholder's participation.

Management Techniques used in the above initiatives

In order to focus on quality and customer satisfaction, Total Quality Management and Kaizen techniques were used to improve public service delivery at the grassroot level. The existing procedures and mechanisms were reviewed and scrutinized and the bottlenecks removed through the technique of Kaizen. Workplace improvement was done with more transparent and accountable style of functioning. 5S strategy and institutionalization of the entire system of governmental functioning especially in key areas involving direct public interaction was done. Moreover, stakeholders' participation was also resorted to. The objective of all these quality management exercises was -

- Citizen services closer to people
- Multiple information under one roof
- System driven delivery of services
- Least physical interface with the government staff
- Transparency in delivery of services
- Value for time and money
- Department staff can focus on core functions
- Higher levels of citizen satisfaction

Positive Outcome

The above initiatives have led to easy and hassle-free access to vital and useful information to the citizens, enhanced transparency and efficiency in administration at the cutting edge, saving in time of citizens and of office staff,

better   monitoring of development schemes etc. *The E-Soochna kiosk at Kullu has been accessed by around 40,000 citizens since its launch. "E-Soochna' and Right to Information Centre will act as a one-stop-solution not only for providing important information to the common public in respect of various works done from government offices but also of the important development activities and their progress."*

- Easy and hassle-free access to vital and useful information to the citizens.
- Enhanced transparency
- Enhanced efficiency in administration at the cutting edge levels of governance
- Saving in time of citizens and of office staff
- Check over corruption
- Better monitoring of development schemes.
- No compulsion for the citizens to come to district/tehsil headquarters.
- Creation of trust & confidence about administration among the public.

Some of the quality improvements are -
- Quality of availability and access to information with citizens enhanced
- Quality of information warehousing & storage improved
- Quality of information dissemination improved
- Quality of pro-active disclosures improved
- Quality of decentralised governance improved
- Quality of public participation in decentralised governance improved
- Quality of public service delivery enhanced through E-Governance and M- Governance.
- Role of intermediaries reduced.
- Levels of sustainability and replicability increased in the State.
- Quality of transparency and accountability levels in the government

enhanced at cutting edge levels of administration

Scope of replication

The above initiatives are not only replicable, but have already been replicated at other places atleast in Himachal Pradesh. The author himself replicated the initiatives pioneered at District Kullu to District Hamirpur. Now the above initiatives are under replication in District Una also – at a much bigger scale. Some of these initiatives like RTI Directories had already been replicated in District Una. It is very easy to sustain and replicate the above initiatives and they can be institutionalized also at other places.

'Knowledge for Community Empowerment and Enhanced Livelihood Opportunities'.
by Bijoy Patro

Background

In a partnership with the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) India, Government of Rajasthan and United Nations Development Program (UNDP), OneWorld Foundation India (hereinafter referred to as One World) introduced a project titled to employ ICTs in the implementation of MGNREGA as a pilot in two districts of Rajasthan – Bhilwara and Udaipur. The project was an on-ground translation of the government's vision towards implementing the Right to Information or RTI. The project, launched on October 2, 2009 went with the following nomenclature:

Knowledge for Community Empowerment and Enhanced Livelihood Opportunities.

Advanced, user-friendly technologies, enabled measurement of the scope of ICT in improving the delivery of services under MGNREGA. It also enabled generating awareness amongst the scheme's intended beneficiaries, especially concerning their entitlements. This was vastly enabled by the Right to Information Act (RTI) that helped in provisioning village resident citizens with necessary livelihood-related information. In so doing, the project adequately harnessed the information needs of the resident citizens of the villages covered by the project in the selected blocks with the information they wanted to get.

The project has helped in evolving an ICT ecosystem offering an innovative service delivery model facilitating the implementation of the Act in terms of managing large scale operations. The ecosystem also aids widening the

outreach of services and transparency, achieved especially with the way it manages large volumes of information. The architecture of the project, coupled with the ecosystem led and fed to its premise that was that provision of free access to information and bolstering public accountability at critical points of the administration and implementation of the scheme would benefit the end users. The project played an important role in harnessing ICTs to improve the quality of service delivery among the scheme's intended beneficiaries in the villages covered under the pilot.

The selection of the communities for the implementation of the pilot phase was governed by three factors:

- To limit impact of a new intervention as it was susceptible to failure;

- To effectively manage the implementation and monitoring of the programme; and,

- To widen the scope and coverage of the initiative which were restricted by limited resources.[2]

Details of the practice

Project Objective

The ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA aimed at harnessing the power of the internet and related communication technologies together with biometrics towards creating a transparent and accountable mechanism of information management and dissemination for the implementation of MGNREGA. Addressing the Right to Information of the population to improve their access to information, the project aimed at enabling the poor, especially women, to demand their rights-based entitlements and ensuring effective devolution of government responsibilities provided under the Act.

Implementation Strategy

Conceptualised for a socio-economic set up (a rural population, low literacy and unfamiliar to technology), the ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA helped capacitate the population's access to information through user-friendly technology. In doing so, it kept the socio-cultural realities of Rajasthan in its view. Hence the pilot included mechanisms to ensure that this section of population could access it, especially through dissemination of information on its availability and use as also for ensuring access to the system. The delivery mechanism was designed as a simple ICT-biometric and voice-guided contraption that did not require much dependence on text. Since the scheme catered to a vast section of the rural population, there was also the need develop a technology that could cater to a large target group. This need was addressed through prioritising low cost technology.

Realising the low technological awareness levels of the target group, user trainings became an important starting point for One World to begin the process. Trainings targeted local programme operators, student volunteers and MGNREGA beneficiaries.

The support – both, technical and administrative – of district and block level officials played an important role in diffusing the technology among the target population. This was particularly propelled with the provision of expertise and insights to secure the effective adoption of the technology at the initiative of the head of the district, district level officials, block officials and block development.

Primary Stakeholders	Project Components
OneWorld Foundation India	*Soochna Seva* information kiosks
Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India	Biometric enabled and GPS verified attendance system
Government of Rajasthan, India	Mobile based job card retrieval
United Nations Development program (UNDP),	Community radio
Local leadership at District/Block and village level	Digital Knowledge Repository
MGNREGA workers	

Soochna Seva Kendra (Information Kiosks)

The 'Soochna Seva Kendra', the name given to the MGNREGA Information Kiosk that formed the human interface of the ICT Enabled Ecosystem acted as a hub of information and knowledge facilitation. Equipped with an advanced ICT enabled apparatus, these information kiosks were designed to provide workers information and assistance on various provisions of MGNREGA and in turn promote and preserve their entitlements provided under the Act.

Three information kiosks, one each at Suwana *Panchayat*, Kanda *Panchayat* and Kuraabad *Panchayat* served 20 villages in all with the aim of securing uninterrupted and transparent flow of information between the beneficiaries (rural households in Rajasthan) and the MGNREGA authorities (*Panchayat* officials)

Figure: Screenshot of the information kiosk to indicate information available

Text-to-speech enabled touch screen application

A touch screen application to make available critical information on job cards, availability of jobs, work status, wages accessible in audio format to users is an innovative user-friendly device designed keeping in view the challenge of low levels of literacy and aimed to bring information to people the way they are best equipped to receive it. The use of local language and user-friendly icons has further eased the information delivery, as a large section of the target users lack basic literacy.

The kiosk captures details like the name and picture of the beneficiary; his/her job card number, village name and status of employment to be given within a stipulated time period under the Act.

One Level Up – Biometric enabled and GPS verified attendance tracking tool

By 2010, a biometric enabled and GPS verified attendance tracking tool – also known as Unified Handheld Device (UHD) – was added to the programme. UHD was created by Intel for rural markets in Asia and Africa. It was customized to facilitate onsite digital muster roll development, work receipt printing, GPS verification of worker location, photo capture of work progress, biometric worker identification and smart card reading.
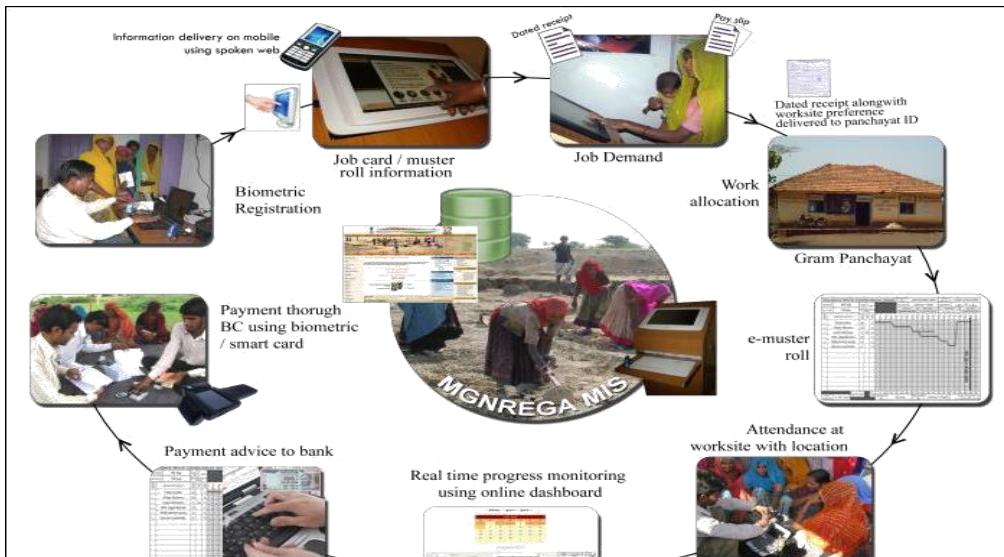
This provisioned a portable computer facility with the bio metric device and enabled with GPS tracking was introduced to digitally generate the worksite muster rolls. This was following an assessment of the outcomes of the pilot of information kiosks in Suwana and Kanda villages and based on the recommendation of the Ministry of Rural Development and *panchayat* secretaries.

Under the new system, the biometric device captured the digital image of a worker's fingerprints as a first step towards creating a biometric template stored and used for consequent examination of identity.

The new introduction, with its GPS-enabled features was used by worksite supervisors (also known as the mate under the Act) to record attendance details of workers. This was especially beneficial as it helped generate muster rolls on spot upon identification of the workers' identity (aided by its biometric facility). This was in contrast to manually-generated muster rolls with scope for duplications, errors and unaccountable practices.

A variety of ICT tools were utilised to enabled efficient implementation of

MGNREGA in Rajasthan. The front end of the technology comprised of the Information Kiosk and the Unified Handheld Device. All registrations done at the Information Kiosk were stored and reverted back in real time by the National Informatics Centre (NIC).

Figure: Process flow of the ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA

Improving access to information through utilization of technology

The introduction of information kiosks under the ICT Ecosystem ensured that precise information related to the Act was available to the citizens at any given time. Earlier, the workers had to rely on the information provided by *gram panchayat* functionaries who acted as middlemen and to the detriment of the workers. Since information dissemination was in the control of middlemen, it was difficult to discern the authenticity and accuracy of the process, thus, leading to instances of corruption. The Information Kiosks played an important role in eliminating the dependence of workers on *gram panchayat* functionaries. The workers could seek MGNREGA related information directly through the kiosk. As per a survey conducted by OneWorld Foundation India of 100 MGNREGA workers in Suwana and Kanda villages in April, 2011 to study the operation and outcomes of the ICT Ecosystem project in Rajasthan, MNREGA

workers in the region were increasingly using the kiosk to seek information. Amongst the information sought, enquiries about job demand were the most common. The graph on the right suggests that approximately 80 percent of the surveyed users preferred to seek information about job demand through the kiosk.

Enhancing efficiency and transparency in government operations

94 per cent of the users surveyed by OneWorld in April, 2011 agreed that the ICT Ecosystem has led to reduction in corrupt practices. Majority of the surveyed users pointed towards instances of corruption and misappropriation being predominant, especially in cases related to job allocation and wage payments prior to the setting up of the ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA. According to these workers, political pressures and elites interests often governed the allocation of jobs earlier. With job demand being channelized through the information kiosks under the ICT Ecosystem, the occurrence of such instances has been regulated. The biometric system has ensured that only actual numbers of work days of a beneficiary is recorded so that data manipulation eventually leading to misdirection of funds is no longer possible.

In order to document the processes involved in the operationalization of ICT facilitated MGNREGA in Rajasthan, the OneWorld research team conducted thorough secondary research on the Act's provisions and implementation to identify the nuances of the scheme. The key resources for the study included the Ministry of Rural Development's website, OneWorld Foundation's case study on the ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA, results of a survey held by OneWorld in Suwana village in April, 2011 and the proposals submitted to the UNDP India in 2008. Based on this information, a set of questions were identified to cover the gaps in the available information through primary research.

There is increasing clarity amongst MGNREGA workers in the ICT enabled ecosystem project areas about their legal entitlements under the Act, as a result they are able to hold the local governance accountable. In the case of grievances, the process of seeking redressal is quick and easy because submission of grievances under the system is digital and details are stored and published online for government official perusal.

Digital Knowledge Repository

In 2009, OneWorld launched a Digital Knowledge Repository as a part of the project to achieve two goals. Firstly, it made available critical information related to the implementation of the Act on the portal for monitoring and assessment. All details captured in the muster rolls were sent to a technical team at OneWorld Foundation for uploading as data on the portal and for display in the form of calendar and on a Google map. Upon clicking on the map and calendar icon, one can access details about the number of workers, their names and job identity.

The second goal was to harness the knowledge portal as a platform for knowledge exchange between MGNREGA policy practitioners. In addition to this, it facilitates in generation and dissemination of information resources on MGNREGA.

Mobile job card retrieval

A SMS job card retrieval was introduced in January 2010 to overcome the barriers arising from poor infrastructure and constrained mobility in rural areas. Village workers were provided the option of sending a low cost SMS to receive job status information such as the number of days worked under MGNREGS and number of work days left on their mobile phones. The cost of the SMS varied as per the SMS rates fixed by individual mobile network providers.

Process Flow

Under the ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA, the rural poor could access information through various stages. MGNREGA workers visit the ICT enabled information kiosks to register themselves. Assisted by a kiosk operator, the user was guided to create a biometric identity with a thumb impression along with his/her photograph.

Hand-in-hand, an auto-enabled touch-screen interface gave workers information on the job cards, job availability, muster rolls, work status and wages. User friendly icons and local language audio assisted workers to make a demand job and print dated receipts/ pay slips.

The *Panchayat* Secretary would use the ICT system to allocate work and generate e-muster rolls based on the workers demand and their preference. Attendance of workers gets captured through a GPS-enabled hand-held device that tracked the worker's location and matched it with the local geographic coordinates of the worksite. The online dashboard allowed officials and other stakeholders to remotely monitor the progress of the work, which was simultaneously updated through the hand-held device. By referring to the e-measurement book and the geo-tagged attendance of the workers, the *Panchayat* office issued payment advice to the bank or the post-office. The business correspondent thereafter visited the worksite or villages and made payments to the workers after verifying their biometric identities.

Project Outcomes

Creation of a successful model for up scaling

The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and the Government of India recognised the success of the pilot phase of the ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA

in Bhilwara and Udaipur district, Rajasthan. This model was also highlighted in its National Policy Framework on biometrically enabled end-to-end ICT application in 2010. This framework aimed at institutionalizing a mechanism to improve public accountability and transparency. The key components of the framework are;

- Biometric based identity authentication and worker registration
- Demand for work through touch screen and text-to-speech enabled computers in the information kiosks and through handheld device at worksites
- Dated acknowledgement of work demand registration with printout in information kiosks and at worksite through handheld device
- Record of workers' attendance in real time at the worksite on wireless handheld devices with biometric and GPS validation
- Digital capture of work measurement at the worksite
- Automated payment to the worker through online pay order to the bank.

But for the facility of an automated payment mechanism, all the other components of the Framework have been successfully tested by the ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA pilot in Rajasthan.

Generating awareness and enhancing participation: reaching the last mile

Improved access to information empowered the local population to become more aware about their rights under MGNREGA. Approximately 80 per cent of the workers surveyed for OneWorld's study in 2011 asserted that enhanced knowledge and information about their entitlement to wages, unemployment allowance and other such provisions has enabled them to assert their demands and hold the duty bearers accountable in significant ways. As per the Kanda *Panchayat* Secretary, the introduction of kiosks also enabled women in the

village to seek and receive information on their own. This increased their confidence levels to a significant extent. The women feel comfortable approaching the kiosks and operating the machines as earlier they had to primarily depend on men for procuring information about their rights.

Community Radio

One World's is a leader in the Community Radio Sector and its strategic 'Communication for Development' effort at the grassroots focused on the radio as a means for people's social and economic empowerment. The project used this traditional tool to reach out to generate awareness among MGNREGA worker about their rights under the Act. Content to inform this activity was drawn from the MGNREGA Knowledge for Action Open Archive and the MGNREGA Knowledge Portal.

This helped create messages on entitlements in the local language for easy assimilation among beneficiaries. These messages were narrowcast and also regularly broadcast.
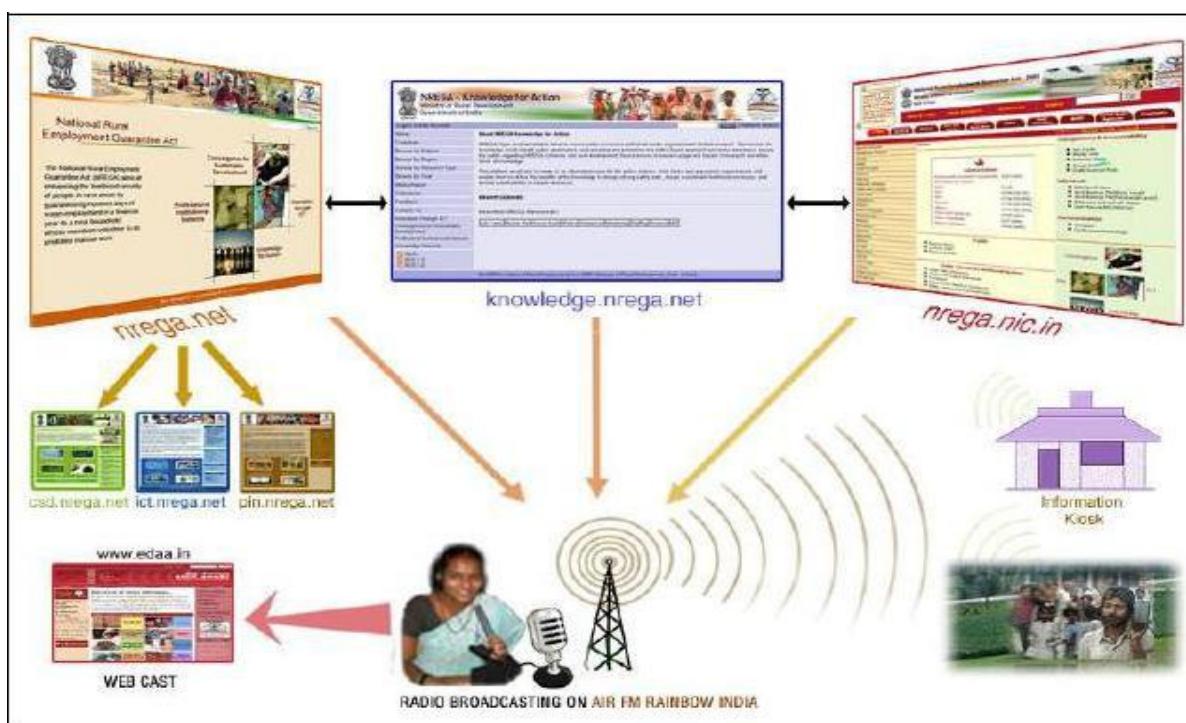

Figure: Enabling community knowledge through radio

Effective delivery of services by government officials

With the village *panchayat* was the agency responsible for implementing the scheme under MGNREGA, local officials were required to undertake all aspects of administration of the Act's implementation at the village level – providing information, registering beneficiaries. Preparing muster rolls, monitoring worksites, and ensuring payments. Timely handling of requests often became difficult because of staff shortage.

The time taken to process a request was reduced with the introduction of the information kiosks. A comparative illustration of the stages of processing a request before and after the initiation of the information kiosk is provided in the figure below. It reflects a reduction in the number of visits workers had to make for receiving work under MGNREGA from about five visits to just one visit. This saved time for both workers and *panchayat* officials who now had ready information to process job requests in a quick manner. *Panchayat* officials could potential workers to the kiosk for information regarding their entitlements under the MGNREGA. This also enabled officials to focus on the monitoring aspects of the Act.

Beneficiary participation also increased over time as was apparent in the enhanced usage of the project components over time. Table 3 gives A breakdown of the category-wise usage of the Soochna Seva Kendra is provided in Table 3.

Challenges in implementation

The most beneficial component of the ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA has been the use of information kiosks. It has been one of the most important components that attracted the women beneficiaries enabling them to overcome the barriers in access to information. However, one of the major roadblocks in widening the

scope and impact of this ICT enabled service delivery mechanism in the state of Rajasthan was the **absence of adequate number of kiosks.** While the project started with three kiosks, finally only one kiosk was operational at Suwana *panchayat* in Bhilwara district. Limited capacity of the implementing agency to expand the project in terms of finances and human resources could be attributed as the primary factor behind its inability to support and sustain the expansion of the project in the region beyond the pilot stage.

It is important to note here that the project was launched on a pilot basis and was exclusively funded by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and implemented by the Government of Rajasthan. Planning for scaling up of the project could not be taken up for lack of budgetary support.

The survey undertaken by One World Foundation revealed that only approximately thirty per cent of the total workers in Suwana and Kanda districts had visited the information kiosks. The figures were indicative of the fact that the majority of rural population has been unable to utilize this service offered by the project. This could be attributed to the **inaccessibility of information kiosks for many members of the rural communities.** Poor roads and lack of adequate public transport facilities restricted the mobility in rural areas in significant ways. The **lack of basic infrastructural development** surfaced as a major roadblock to efforts at expanding the outreach of the project.

Although the essence of ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA lies in awareness generation and ensuring accountability, a deeper **understanding about its purpose and methodology continues to remain very low** in rural areas. Reaching out to people at the grassroots level and making them understand the nuances of the project remained a major challenge that needs to be addressed.

The SMS job card retrieval component that provided easy access to job card information was not received well by the rural beneficiaries. The survey undertaken by OneWorld Foundation India suggested that **low level of usage was on account of the SMS costs** charged by the service providers.

Effective implementation of any initiative not only depends upon the demand side sensitization but at the same time the capacity building of public officials to strengthen the supply side adequately. The **service delivery mechanism is yet to be institutionalized into the government processes** adopted for implementation of the Act. Government officials have to be included and trained in the process of implementing and up scaling the ICT Ecosystem model because they will play a key role in the successful working of the model.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) funded the pilot phase (2009-2011) of the ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA project in Bhilwara and Udaipur districts of Rajasthan. Since the completion of the pilot in 2011, the project is being handled solely by OneWorld Foundation India. Due to paucity of funds, the pilot project at Udaipur was closed and the kiosks at Kanda and Suwana *Panchayat* were merged. Later in April, 2013 the kiosk in Suwana *panchayat* was also closed after sustaining it for one year without any financial assistance by OneWorld Foundation India. The operational costs incurred by OneWorld Foundation India to sustain and maintain this project is approximately INR 25,000 per month.

For the duration of the project, the users could avail all the services under this project free of cost. However, a user had to bear the costs of availing information through mobile phones. This included the charges for sending a local SMS prefixed by the concerned mobile network provider.

Key lessons

Streamlining delivery of services through ICT
By leveraging ICT, the project has enabled a mechanism that has been able to streamline the delivery of services under MGNREGA. Ridden with several challenges, predominantly that of middlemen, the ICT system has simplified information management and dissemination and has enabled to effectively link the key levels of service delivery from the issuance of job cards, work allocation, wages, work evaluation and monitoring. Since majority of beneficiaries of MGNREGS were women, this streamlining created spaces where the access of information were easily achieved and did not have to follow gendered patterns.

Capitalizing on the benefits of transparent information dissemination
ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA was premised on the goal of enabling a citizenry, which was informed about its rights and entitlements. Transparent flow of information could play an important role in securing a degree of accountability in the delivery of services. This ensured that citizens are not only aware about their entitlements but at the same time that of the responsibilities of the decision makers. Enabling mechanisms of service delivery along these lines could play an important role in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the governance apparatus.

Enhancing the participation of government to ensure project sustainability
The project had played an important role in altering the implementation of MGNREGA in significant ways. However, the impact of the ICT Ecosystem remained restricted as it is yet to be integrated with the government mechanism. The extent to which it could contribute to the holistic transformation of the implementation of the Act depended on the active participation of the

government in widening the scope of the initiative. The institutionalization of the project as a government process could secure the initiative the support it requires in terms of finances, technology, infrastructure and, most importantly, the complete integration of the model with the local governance apparatus. However, since this kind of support to the pilot is still awaiting the completion of Aadhaar enrolment in the state, after which there is a hope that the pilot will get up-scaled to be implemented in the entire state.

Customizing the technology to accommodate local context

One of the pressing challenges that have surfaced in the implementation of the ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA is the problem of connectivity. Given the limited number of kiosks, accessibility to its services has remained limited to those residing within its close proximity. Owing to the lack of infrastructure and absence of adequate transportation options, a predominant section of the rural population could not be targeted under the project. A key lesson learnt in this particular case was the need to support any form of technological development with a simultaneous strengthening of the socio-economic context. It is important to effectively capacitate rural areas to access the benefits of ICT. Further, since the access to technology also has gendered difference there is a need to take measures that engender the initiatives and allow for an equitable involvement of women, especially in the rural areas.

Employing user-friendly technology garners widespread support

The simple and user friendly nature of information kiosks played an important role in ensuring its effective functioning in rural areas. High illiteracy levels and lack of adequate technological awareness act as a major obstacle in ensuring the effective capitalization of ICT technology specifically in rural areas. The ICT Ecosystem for MGNREGA has been designed in view of these limitations. It adopts a technological architecture that is easy to use and does not require

extensive knowledge or training. Further, care has been taken to involve women in this endeavor by bringing the technology to their doorstep and by ensuring that their access to it is not hampered by appointing a local woman as a kiosk manager and radio program coordinator.

The Way Forward / Scope

As per the discussions with the technical team at OneWorld Foundation India, proposals have been made to integrate Unique Identification Number or Aadhaar Identity Cards as a key component of the project. This is in view of enhancing the authenticity of claims for job cards. This will also act as an additional component to eliminate any scope for duplication and errors in authentication process. The scope that this initiative has shown in streamlining the implementation of the MGNREGS reasserts that such process-reengineering initiatives can enhance the effectiveness of service delivery and also achieve inclusion of women in the process.

Transparency and Accountability in Electoral Processes-Myneta Web Portal

by Mr. Manoj Kumar and Mr. Nilesh Nischal Ekka

Background

The "right to receive information" is essentially a derivative of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression as guaranteed by Article 19(1) (a) of the constitution of India. The people of the country have a right to know the background details of their elected representatives. The Supreme Court of India in its2002 landmark judgment in the case Union of India vs Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR)& Others *[W.P.(C) No.294 of 2001]*directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to institute a system where the self-sworn affidavits; containing the background information of candidates contesting the elections such as criminal offences committed in past, financial assets and liabilities, educational qualifications; were made the necessary part of the nomination paper furnished by the candidates.

1. Perceiving the demand from the citizens for the information regarding the background information of the candidates contesting the elections, ADR set out on a mission (a) to strengthen and bolster the mechanism of ECI machinery which strives to disseminate the self-sworn affidavits of the contesting candidates not only on the respective Chief Electoral Officer website but also by putting up the affidavits information at major places in the constituency where voters can easily access them; and(b) to disseminate on the widest possible scale to the citizens of India, the information contained in the affidavits helping the citizens make an informed choice. These twin tenets together formed the soul of the suo-motu or proactive

disclosures in the Right to Information Act, 2005 i.e. to place a large amount of information on a proactive basis to make the functioning of the Public Authorities more transparent and also to reduce the need for filing individual RTI applications.

2. ADR designed an elaborate and extensive dissemination program that included forming a nation-wide network of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) with designated coordinator(s) in each state, collaborating with conventional (Newspapers, Magazine, Radio, TV) media options and employing new-age (website, social-media, mobile phones, smartphones etc.) information broadcasting solutions with the copious application of the state-of-art information technologies to achieve the maximum scalability and smartness in the propagation of the information.

3. With the relentless perseverance of ADR and an extremely optimistic and encouraging cooperation from the ECI,ADR developed Myneta web portal tomimic the very essence of the pro-active disclosures as mandated under the section-4 of the RTI Act, 2005.

Details of the Practice

1. **Engaging with ECI and Other Stakeholders**

   Scanning and uploading of digital copies of the self-sworn affidavits filed by the candidates contesting elections, either Parliamentary elections or State Assembly elections, received along with the nomination papers by the District Election Officers (DEOs)has now become a standard part of the proactive disclosures by the CEO and ECI. This exemplary exercise has had its own learning curve and ADR's perseverance and the motivation of the PIOs over the years has also played a major role in this regard.

ADR collaborated with the DEOs and CEOs for making the information contained in the election affidavits available to the citizens at large and how the information contained in the affidavits is a quintessential part of a healthy and participative democracy. The efforts of the ADR gradually began bearing fruits when affidavits started being perceived as integral part of the nomination process and the related processes such as scrutiny of affidavits, digitization of affidavits and uploading the digital copies of the affidavit on the website became the most prominent activities surrounding the entire nomination process. The quality of digitization of affidavits also improved during the due course of time by the ADR's relentless follow-up.

2. **Nation-wide network of CSOs with designated state units in every state**
   The unyielding determination of ADR in pursuing the ECI machinery to put out the affidavits in public domain has been over the years been supported by an elaborately planned nation-wide network of CSOs. These bodies, present in each state of the country, consist of volunteers who act as members of ADR family in appealing and persuading the election officials to process the huge volume of affidavits in requisite quality and within stipulated time limit. These associates of ADR in states also act as vital cog in dissemination of information contained in the affidavits. These volunteers conduct seminars, engage local press and television media and also carry out programs such as street-plays, quiz competitions, debates etc. in schools, colleges, office complexes and various public places such as markets, railway stations, bus stations etc. in order to disseminate the collated information contained in the affidavits.

3. **Evolution of a culture of an un-biased and impartial dissemination**

    The information contained in the affidavits is about the background details of the candidates such as the cases pending against them in a court of law, their financial assets and liabilities, their educational qualifications and details such as candidates' age, last income tax return etc. These pieces of information have potential to be used as political tools during elections and hence the nature of this information demands that ADR evolves a culture of being unbiased and impartial not only in processes of data collation and data dissemination but also with regard to the personalities and volunteers who associate with the ADR's mission.

4. **Internet-based software for data (contained in affidavits) digitization**

    After the initial years when the affidavit data used to be processed using stand-alone tools like spreadsheets, the volume and scope of the operation of processing the affidavit data demanded a comprehensive internet based software. For example, in LokSabha 2009 total number of candidates who contested the election was 8070 which rose to 8251 in LokSabha 2014.

    Using the low cost open source technology ADR developed an internet based software in order to digitize the affidavit data. This software provides for all the features that would address all the intricate demands of the process to capture the affidavit data in digital format. The elaborate security features of the software and its scalability ensured the sanctity of the data as well as the scope of the data.

5. **Robust data entry and stringent data verification and validation practices**

    The nature of data contained in the affidavit is of varied domains. There is data such as pending court cases that would demand deep understanding of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and various central and state government

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legislations, then there is data pertaining to the financial assets- movable and immovable- that would require the knowledge of various asset classes and how they are valued. The scale of the data and its sensitive nature demands that we at ADR have a well-defined system (a) to understand the data, especially while dealing with various complex scenarios, (b) to capture the data in digital format, (c) to verify the digitized data, (d) to validate the digitized data against the originally filed in affidavit. The over-arching principle that we follow at ADR while digitizing the affidavit data is "What You See Is What You Get" that means that digitized information will be a carbon copy of the information contained in the affidavit.

6. **Comprehensive and precise reporting framework for data collation**

The data once captured is trawled by the reporting framework in order to generate meaningful and discernible information. The reporting framework is programed in low cost open source software and generates reports such as most wealthy candidates contesting the elections, the number of candidates that have cases against them, the candidates who have studied till under-graduate or graduate level.

7. **Development of Myneta.info web portal**

In order to exhibit the information pertaining to candidates' affidavits on a centralized platform in a well laid out schema so that citizens can access information easily, free of cost and round the clock, ADR developed a website www.myneta.info . On this website is housed in a well assorted manner, the election wise and constituency wise, the details of candidates' along with the digital copies of the original affidavits as well as the digitized searchable data. This website over the years has become one of the most searched website in the country.

8. **Main-stream media focus for widespread dissemination of data**

   The descriptive reports, based on the affidavit data, are emailed to a massive network of journalists who in turn publish the same in their respective publications both in print as well as in internet versions. The state units of the ADR also conduct press conferences and elaborate on the report in regional languages.

9. **Low cost information dissemination**

   a. **Mobile Phones**
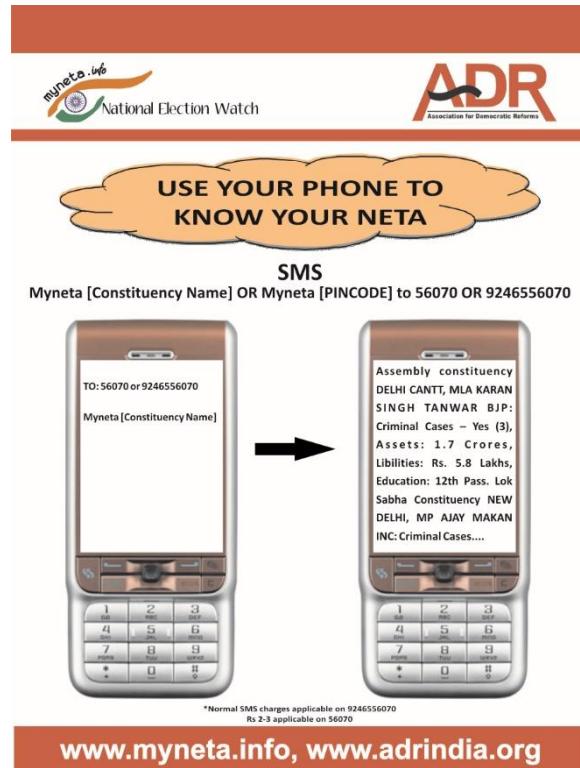
      Pull SMS-ADR provides a smart and intricate mobile based service where a citizen can pull the information pertaining to the candidates contesting election in his/her constituency. The citizen may send a request SMS "MYNETA PINCODE/CONSTITUENCY_NAME" to 56070 in order to pull candidates' information from our database. This service during election is also used by a slew of media companies as well that they promote in their newspaper or television networks.

      Push SMS & IVR-During elections ADR also send the candidates' information to the citizens on their mobiles phones (in text as well as in audio form) for which citizens don't have to pay at all.

      USSD-There is also an interactive USSD protocol based service that ADR provides on the short-code "*325*35#". Citizens can dial this number on their phones (doesn't require internet, or smartphone) to fetch candidates' information for free of cost.

b. Smartphones

ADR has a Myneta smartphone app that provides information to the citizens about the candidates contesting elections in their respective constituencies.

c. Social Media

Facebook and Twitter - ADR has an active Facebook page subscribed to which is a large sized vibrant community. ADR disseminates on regular basis the information, regarding candidates contesting elections, through well designed campaigns. These campaigns aim to organically spread the information among the users of the social media.

YouTube- During elections, ADR explores creative ways to spread-out the candidates' information among the citizens at large and

producing videos containing the ADR's messages is one such prominent effort. ADR engage celebrities such as film-makers, sport-stars, musicians, social activists, media journalists etc. in order to spread the message of "informed choice during election". These videos are then uploaded on the YouTube in order to achieve virality on the platform.

Google- In LokSabha 2014 election ADR collaborated with Google to develop a start-of-art platform where internet users can fetch their candidates' information in a very interactive manner. This became one of the most sought after destination during the elections.

It has been a long journey for ADR since the time the Supreme Court judgment of 2002 came and the system of affidavit was established by the ECI. All the processes have evolved gradually during this time and it is because of this robust evolution process that the task taken up by the ADR today has become a nationwide campaign and a constant during each state assembly or a Parliamentary election.

1. **Availability of Affidavits** - Affidavits to various elections were not available under one link. Every state has a different Chief Electoral Officer's website which uploads affidavits to elections in their respective states. Clicking and downloading each and every affidavit from several websites was quite a tedious job. ADR has developed software for downloading and uploading all the affidavits on a single portal Myneta.info. Scanned copies of the affidavits of all the candidates who have contested elections (General and State Assembly) after the Supreme Court judgment, making it mandatory to submit affidavits during nominations to elections, are available and can be viewed and downloaded from Myneta.info.

2. **Regional Languages** – Affidavits were submitted in Hindi, English and various regional languages by the contesting candidates. As the team was small and only knew a few regional languages, volunteers across states, who were well versed with reading and writing their respective regional languages were trained through video and audio conferencing. Since, the data entry and verification can be done online from anywhere in the world, volunteers from all across India came together to tackle this issue. These volunteers have since been an integral part of ADR and continue to train other new members.

3.   **Dissemination of Information**–The next big challenge was to disseminate the data containing information about candidates contesting elections. ADR utilized several different mediums to spread this information. Print, Electronic, Mobile and other technologies were used to spread the reports consolidated in a very user friendly and easy to read and understand format.

4.   **Economic Feasibility** – To increase the outreach in a very low cost and user friendly way, all low cost options were explored. The cost burden was shifted from the user who wanted information and innovative ways were utilized by ADR to provide information free of cost to the user.

5.   **Helpline and Feedback Mechanism** - Queries from the citizens, journalists, academicians etc. were quite frequent and they often requested speedy resolution of their queries either on the phone or in an email. ADR initiated a toll free service and also sms and email based solutions to address the increasing demand for information about candidates contesting elections.

Outcome

Right to information as a tool to access publicly held information has significant bearing on good governance and development. In a democratic country like ours, making an informed choice to elect our representatives is one of the foremost strengths of our democratic process. Myneta portal has enabled citizens to participate in this process and make an informed decision. The effect of Myneta on proactive disclosures has been tremendous.

   1   The platform created by ADR has helped in creating a conducive environment for all stake holders by contributing to free and fair

elections. The easy availability of background information of the candidates contesting elections at a push of a button has helped in rebuilding faith and interest in our electoral processes.

2 Citizens can now make informed opinions. The information to choose the best candidates as their elected representatives and thereby influencing important policy decisions and eventually becoming a part of good governance measures for themselves and for the coming generations.

3 The easy availability of a candidate's background information has aided the common citizen's need to seek information regarding their elected representatives.

4 ADR from time to time keeps assisting the various stakeholders and public authorities in making appropriate disclosures as per the section 4 of the RTI Act. ADR has repeatedly brought to fore the need for suo-motu disclosures by public authorities in larger public interest.

5 The capacity building of the various public officials involved in the electoral process has received immense encouragement with the continuous and real time updates regarding election related events and documents on the myneta website.

6 Proactive disclosures have increased in matters related to electoral processes as Myneta portal has simplified the information contained in the affidavits and other public documents submitted during elections. ADR has tried to fill in for the PIOs dealing with election related public documents by covering all aspects usually neglected due to overburdened election officials. The PIOs are relatively relaxed and in a positive frame of mind to deal with the RTI applications.

7 The number of RTI Appeals with the Information Commissions is growing at a rapid pace year after year. ADR has assisted in reducing the pendency status indirectly by proactively disclosing and simplifying the affidavits of contesting candidates in elections.

Scope of Replication

There is an immense scope of replication of the ADR practices as it will assist other CSOs and public authorities in many ways.

1. **Simplify and enhance the process of suo-motu disclosures** – Every public authority is expected to proactively disclose and place a large amount of information in public domain to make the functioning of the public authorities more transparent and also to reduce the need for filing individual RTI application. Myneta portal can be imitated by Public Authorities as well as by other CSOs to proactively disclose in local language and in an easy to understand format, information/data related to their line of work or public office. Such a portal can help disclosures to be made in as many mediums as possible and disclosures can be kept up to date. For e.g. the ECI can borrow this link (www.myneta.info) and place it on their website to fulfil the legal obligation cast upon them under the RTI Act. Similarly, other public authorities can utilize this platform for placing their proactive disclosures in the public domain.

2. **Local Body Elections** – Depending on the resources and manpower available the scope of Myneta.info can be increased to cover local body elections as well. The various district authorities and state election commissions can replicate this portal.

3. **Easy and simplified reports/analysis**– There is a need to simplify various technical public data and to be placed in the public domain for which no single source is available. The public authorities/CSOs can mimic this effort.

4. **Research** - As an organization working in the field of RTI and proactive disclosures, ADR realized that simplified data formats can be utilized for quality research in various fields to gain socio-economic benefits for the society. The content provided by ADR is backed by accurate research corroborated by official documents.

5. **Low cost dissemination of data** - Information and data can be presented in open and free data formats whereby it can be pulled by different Application Protocol Interfaces to be used in different fashions more appropriate to specific contexts and needs. Various powerful visualization techniques can be utilized to present information/data which can give important insights that may remain largely hidden in a textual or tabular presentation of data. All kinds of different media and forms could be used for proactive disclosures.

6. **Feedback Mechanism** - The public authorities may imitate the use of e-mail, sms or social media platforms like Facebook and twitter to deal with the queries of the readers and reply to them. This builds up goodwill and loyal following. With the help of this feedback mechanism the public authorities/CSOs can build up goodwill and also keep on improving upon current measures to promote transparency and accountability. The public authorities/CSOs can create a platform for sharing the views with the users / customers. A platform for sharing views, opinions, challenges and constraints would be critical in including the opinion of the public in improving governance.

7. **Promoting Transparency**- Just as information and knowledge is shared by ADR on the website to empower the common people so that they can make an informed choice, all public authorities and CSOs can consider disseminating information about their organization on a daily

basis. It would aid in devising an action plan for adoption / adaption by public authorities/CSOs to promote transparency in the working of every organization.

8. **Framework for citizen government partnership** - ADR has provided a framework for promotion of citizen-government partnership in carrying out various programs for the welfare of the people. The assortment of information as provided on Myneta portal can be widened by the public authorities and CSOs enabling the citizens to participate in economic and political processes through interactions and feedbacks between people and the government on public policies.

Strengthening Democracy, Empowering through Promoting a Rights perspective and RTI
by Falguni Jadeja

Background

SWATI's presence has been in the Surendranagar district for almost 16 years. As an outcome of its activities, in two blocks Patdi and Dhrangadhra, women's federations known as Mahila Vikas Sanghs (MVS- Women's Development Association), have been formed. MVS are now independent organizations having about 4500 women members.

SWATI- Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives works to build women's leadership at the grassroots and help them gain control over resources in a rights perspective, SWATI has organised women into large-scale, block-level collectives. These work on developmental issues of women and communities. To increase the outreach of its work, SWATI aligns with other groups and organisations through capacity building and networking for collective action in the areas of violence against women, empowering through right to information and advocacy for reproductive health concerns of women. Since 2005, when Right to Information (RTI) Act came into effect, SWATI recognized the immense potential this act offers, to capacitate the poor and marginalized sections of the community and particularly women to demand their rights and lawful entitlement. In 2006 SWATI initiated its work on promoting RTI in Surendranagar district with the aim of empowering women and building a peoples' movement for eradicating corruption and creating a transparent administration through training federation members, NGO activists and civil society organizations in the use of RTI. This programme named as 'Strengthening democracy: Empowering through Promoting a Rights perspective and Right to Information' yielded demonstrable impact in initial two years in Surendranagar District, leading to its further expansion in two

more districts Patan and Mehsana in year 2008. Thus in four years the programme has spread into 3 districts

Blocks to people's access to the Act:

1. Lack of clarity amongst citizens on what and how to seek information

2. Lack of information on procedures and formats to be followed under the Act

3. Lack of clarity on how much information can be sought in one application

4. Behaviour and attitude of the government officers dissuades people to use RTI. They often demand as to why the person requires this information or ask him/her to take the information informally rather than seeking it through RTI

5. People living below poverty line are to be provided information free. This is often not known to the people and the government departments have charged a fee.

Designing our STRATEGY:

Team's understanding of the Act itself, peoples' perception towards it, and problems faced while accessing the information generated a more profound vision of what is to be done. Some of the basic principles on which programme foundation and strategy is laid are:

1. The programme should evolve as a community people's movement.

2. SWATI's role should be mainly centred around coordination, capacity building, networking and advocacy.

The programme should not stop at just creating awareness but should actually enable people toact and provide support as needed.

3. SWATI's overall vision of empowering women should be strengthened by this programme.

Strategy for the programme:-

1. Networking with local groups, CBOs and other NGOs to form citizen's forums (Associations) at Block and District level;

2. Developing a group of RTI trainers who can further train volunteers at village level;

3. Prepare a cadre of Volunteers including women who can assist the community in using the RTI Act;

4. Create awareness of the Act amongst the community and promote it's use through educational material, campaigns, block level camps, frequent village visits by volunteers etc;

5. Setting up of Nagrik Adhikar Sahayta Kendras (Citizen's Rights Help Desk- NASK)and a telephone helpline to facilitate and support communities in seeking information under RTI;

6. Liaoning and advocacy with government officials for effective implementation of RTI act.

Role of community

CREATING PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT THROUGH BUILDING CITIZEN'S ASSOCIATIONS

From the beginning it was realized by SWATI that if the RTI act is to really percolate down to the whole cross section of rural community and at the same time spread across the district, then this can be done most effectively by involving local NGOs, CBOs, village level associations, and people representing different strata of community. If it has to become a peoples' movement to build democracy at grassroots, then right from the beginning it requires strategic interventions that would create a broader (beyond SWATI) ownership of the programme.

BUILDING ASSOCIATIONS

Formal dialogue with civil society organisations and individuals. Involving total of 2250 persons that includes community leaders, civic society groups, farmers groups, women's associations, retired government officials, teachers, lawyers and people from village committees, regional CBO-NGO representatives etc

These meetings served to shape a process through which the initial vision of one organization SWATI, became a shared vision of all the participants. Along with orientation to the Act, positive experiences of using RTI by SWATI and others were shared to motivate the participants. Towards the end of the initial meetings, interested participants, individuals as well as organizations came together to form an association known as **Mahiti Adhikar ABhiyan – Association** at the block and district level. A block level committee of 5-6 interested association members were formed who would actively participate in further planning process at the local level. 3 District level Associations were formed covering 8 Blocks, Mahiti Adhikar Abhiyan –assocation4 Surendranagar, Patan, and Mehsana 3 district.

> **Capacity building of Association representatives:** Association members have played an leading role in organizing campaign at village level, publishing proactive disclosure, and wall painting related to RTI. In addition to this they are also efficiently using RTI by self and providing guidance to others.

From the experience gathered from using RTI since last four years it has come out that there lacuna in implementation and response to the application done under the act pertaining to infrastructure, administration and policy. A meeting was organized at district and block level to represent the concerned issues at state level with representatives.

❖ **Strategies used to reach out to the communities :-**

1- **Association – 3 district total 2844 members including veterans from respective fields – teachers, journalists, union members, SHG groups, farmers**

2- **Volunteers – 1750 volunteers covering 3 district 10 blocks, 525 villages**

3- **NASK – In 9 blocks**

Helpline – Receiving average 5 – 7 calls per day from approx. 8 distrcits.

❖ **Achievements SWATI has reached out to 100530 people through volunteers, awareness campaigns, seminars, helpline, etc.**

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT of our community based Association

.1- *Leadership Building*: a clear leadership has emerged in the association which is an impact of leadership roles being played in different forums and focused and sustained capacity building inputs. Leadership has emerged at different levels in the association, which makes it stronger.

2*. Building an Identity*: Association members have built an identity of their own through constant coordination with government officials. Thus they have got credence by government officials at various levels as a group committed towards human and citizenry rights. This has further resulted in efficient resolution of issues, advocacy with government and overall achievement of results.

3- *Shouldering Huge Responsibilities and Ownership:* The association members have organized block level events that has not only increased their capacity to organize block level events but has also brought in a sense of ownership for the cause, thus increasing the sense of responsibility towards the same. They are also taking leadership in shaping the future direction of

association and its work, which is a manifestation of the increased sense of ownership and responsibility. Another way in which the emerging leadership can be seen is that there have been a number of decisive steps that they have taken on their own.

4*. Increase in Enthusiasm*: The enthusiasm to work for community or society at large and bring tangible results is palpable among the association members.

5- *Enhancement of Personal Skills:* While the association members are increasing the scale, linkages and coordination with government and taking up newer challenges in the way of their constant efforts to activate and strengthen NASK , not only the association is being strengthened, but skills and potentials at a personal level are also getting space to develop.

Role of Association members
- Identify/support volunteers and their training
- Resource pool of trainers
- Plan/coordinate field activities at block level
- House NASK on weekly basis
- Coordinate / promote   issue based campaigns
- Hold camps to promote se of RTI and maintain records of applications under RTI

Role of Volunteers
- Promote RTI thru village level awareness activities (mobile camps/campaigns)
- Help conduct issue based campaigns
- Participate in Block level RTI camps
- Support people in applications, paperwork and forward it to NASK
- Run NASK on a weekly basis

- Distribute IEC material, conduct group meetings on govt. schemes

Nagrik Adhikar Sahayta Kendra

- A Total of 8 NASKs in 3 districts.
- Association supported-hosted by local NGO in 7 blocks , and association member in 1 block.   3 blocks in Surendranagar (Chuda, Dhrangdhra, Patdi,) 3 in Mehsana/Patan (kadi .kheralu. Visnagar)
- Support to people to file applications and provide accompaniment through the process.

Phone Helpline

- Helpline operated by SWATI Staff through a publicised telephone number.
- Average of 8 calls a day
- Over   11287 calls over the period with around 48% from women
- Calls from across 7 districts/16 blocks/643 villages

Issue based Campaigns undertaken through Association member's

Based on types of complaints, campaign on:

- Right to Food PDS
- Child rights RTE
- Land rights and inheritance
- Right to work NREGS

Block Level: resulted in 789 complaints

634 PDS, 132 lend Rights , 92 NREGS, 27 inheritance

Advocacy and Networking: Increasing our Sphere of influence

- Influencing Mamlatdars to issue orders for PDS release
- Land Inheritance 4 cases resolved
- NREGS activation 55 villages

- Proactive disclosures in 5 gram panchayts\ Proactive disclosure at PDS shops in three blocks

Working with govt. on RTI Act
- Invited by SPIPA to collaborate

- Training of Govt. functionaries (Talati)

- RTI orientation of govt. officials/Panchayat members

- Member of Expert Group of Gujarat govt.

- Regular coordination with State Information Commission

- Coloration with district panchayat Mehsana Deputy DDO and Collector

Highlights of the association;-
- After the capacity building training members of the association has recommended to plan block wise trainings and further they have organized it effectively.

- 174 women joined the association within the 15 days of starting the project (PATDI -65 women, KHERALU -30 women, KADI- 15 women, CHUDA-15 women, PATAN- 14 women, VISNAGAR- 35 women).

- A positive change in the roles of fellowship and association by organizing training at block levels.

- Leadership provides confidence and capacity in the members.

- More women have visited NASK mainly in KHERALU, KADI and UDALPUR.

- Now it was an easy process to work with block level Panchayats and Mamlatdar.

- Leaders take initiatives to implement the provisions of RTI act.

- Process of learning and informing others about RTI.

- Skill has developed in conducting trainings as they have done it at district level in 8 blocks with the 482 Talatis.

Project implementation by association Activates

❖ Inaguration of Udalpur NASK

NASK was inaugurated at Udalpur. The representatives of Visnagar association anchored the entire programme that was joined by Taluka president of congress party, sarpanch of 6 villages, 3 former sarpanch and 125 people from nearby villages.

Public Consultation with Construction Labour of Kheralu Block

In this programme officials of Block Panchayat remained present in the consultation. 84 construction workers from 9 villages of Kheralu

Developing a force Of RTI Support VOLUNTEERS

The programme relies for its implementation on a highly inspired, committed and rigorously trained team of volunteers. In Surendranagar from 600villages, a total of 1300 volunteers including 893 men and 407 women and from Patan and Mehsana Districts more than 900 volunteers including 541 men and 359 women have been prepared.

Block and district level public hearings on the issues of Right to Food, Right to land, NREGS and follow up – Context of holding Jansunvai (Public hearing):

Having analysed the applications and the kind of issues faced by citizens in five blocks thru' help desks and mobile camps, it was felt by the association that, there needs to be concrete efforts done for the rights based issues such as –

a) Right to Food - under the Public Distribution System
b) Child rights and execution of various schemes meant for children such as ICDS
c) Land rights and inheritance
d) Right to work and NREGS

Public Awareness activity by Association
➢ **Wall paintings with messages on RTI**

To bring further awareness regarding the law a wall painting programmed was organized in 7 blocks of Surendranagr, Mehsana and Patan. The participants painted the main wall in the city with pictures having messages related to the RTI Act. Local organizations, authorities remained present.

Inauguration of camps in Blocks was done by invited guests and association members. During day visitors were provided information about the law by volunteers. While pictures were being painted on the wall visitors had a look at them and would also lend helping hand while discussing the law and providing their own opinions.

Varahi block kadi   Taluka panchayat

The process was like a public campaign, with publicity and open invites. Thus People came to watch, participate, shared their concerns and at the same time got their application ready. People showed interest in being members of association and got their names registered for the same. Because of picture display at prominent place more people are getting aware about the law.

Process and experience related to Proactive Disclosure in Gram Panchayat
As per section 4(1) of the Act which specifies public offices to undertake proactive disclosure to ensure transparency and quick solution to local issues activities were undertaken by "Surendranagar RTI Campaign" as per instruction given by Collector office. Also the procedure for proactive disclosure was done with gram panchayats from Surendranagar, Mehsana, Patan

The message of RTI on Kites:

In Gujarat Uttrayan- the festival of kites is celebrated with great zeal and enthusiasm. To take the maximum benefit of the opportunity to publicize RTI act SWATI decided to make public aware about RTI and the Helpline number through the kites as medium. The two districts of a total of 6000 kites were distributed- 4000 in Surendranagar and 2000 in Mehsana Patan. Panchayat body members, community leaders, Teachers etc. took active part in the program. Teachers were of the opinion that this will help in developing children as aware citizens. People were of the opinion that this will reach to an approximately 20000 people taking into consideration that one kite will take the message to 5 people.

Key Interventions:

➢ **RTI Mobile Camps:**

Camps were meant to provide publicity to the Act, and provide need based support to villagers in actually preparing applications. Camps were organized at three levels block level, village level and year around mobile camp where total of 2348 people including men and women have attended block level camps. Total of 225 villages in six blocks; Halvad, Patdi, Dhrangadhra, Limadi, Lakhtar and Chuda of Surendranagar were covered. In Mehsana and Patan total 279 villages were covered and identifying 515 issues during village level camps. Total of 675 camps were organized by mobile camp till date

➢ **District and block level awareness camps on RTI –**

With an aim to create awareness on RTI act within the civil society and promote use of the RTI act, block and district level awareness camps were planned, which were conducted in Patdi block in August and in Surendranagar district in September. For holding these 4 day camps, different processes were carried out at village and block level like inviting local NGOs, the administrative staff, motivating villagers to participate in the camp using educational materials, etc. The details of 2 camps held at Patdi block and Surendranagar district

Nagrik Adhikar Sahayta Kendras :

Nagrik Adhikar Sahayata Kendras are functional in 5 blocks of Surendranagar district namely Patdi, Dhrangadhra, Halvad, Limbdi and Chuda. Association members regularly visit the *Nagrik Adhikar Sahayata Kendras* to ensure their active functioning. Records are being maintained at all the Kendras like Visitor's Register, Application Register, Appeal Register, Application File etc. These records are strongly monitored on a

monthly basis to ensure follow ups on cases. Trained volunteers are being seated at the *Nagrik Adhikar Sahayata Kendras* to guide and help visitors thus gaining hands on experience on the RTI Application filing. These Kendras also act as resource hub for various govt. schemes running in the area by providing application forms for the same. Help desk is functional in Mehsana and Patan Districts

> **Help Line:**
> A helpline has been initiated and its number publicised through the print and audio-visual media. Though slow in the initial months, an average of four calls seeking information and / or problem solving support is received by the help line. A register is maintained and the details of the case, and the advice given is recorded. Each help call is followed up for further support and its outcome. The help line received questions related to the procedural aspects of the Act, about government schemes, land related issues, issues related to health, social security, revenue department etc.

A mobile phone helpline has been initiated and the phone number publicized through the print and audio-visual media. . At present on an average daily 6-8 phone calls are received on the help line. A register is maintained and the details of the case and the advice given are recorded. Each help call is followed up for further support and its outcome.

> **Networking and Advocacy:**
> Throughout the programme, Liaison with government officials and other possible users of the Act remained an integral part. Public Hearing was one of the most striking examples of how advocacy efforts were merged with community awareness and mobilization activities. (Mahiti Adhikar Abhiyn Surendranagar has its focus on proactive disclosure at the fair

price shops by using methods of survey, Jansunwais, press conference and collective demand at the highest levels in the state. AKPBS one of the active local CBO at Mehsana, took the initiative to organize training in RTI for the Gram Mitras. SWATI also organized district and block level orientation meeting for Government officials. 158 officials were present at the programme. Dr Ganatra, An RTI expert and consultant at SPIPA, DDO, Chairperson of District Panchayat, and District health officials also attended the meeting. Block level officials also participated in the programme.

A meeting to form a network for effective and widespread implementation of the Act was held at various places Where local organizations from Sabarkantha, Banaskantha and experts form Baroda districts were present. Planning for further expansion of programme was done where participants shared their opinions and suggestions. Also a discussion for next state level meeting was done to which 6 NGOs and 37 participants gave their consent.

To get proactive disclosure implemented in whole Surendranagar district a meeting was done with District Commissioner where 2 Sarpanch and 4 association members shared their experience regarding the display of information under proactive disclosure and suggested the same to be done at district level. Commissioner appreciated the work and assured to provide further support. Thereafter said representation was done before Secretary, RTI cell, Mr. Arvindbhai Aggrawal.

Scope for replication

Learning about the interventions on RTI campaign by SWATI, the director of SPIPA proposed a collaboration to promote awareness on the act, especially in Mehsana & Patan districts. A planning meeting was held with the district

collectors, DDOs and vice director of SPIPA along with SWATI for campaign design, education material generation and the overall planning. 4 volunteers from blocks and a coordinator from SWATI were associated with 'On the Wheel RTI campaign' held for 7 days. Rallies were brought out, block level camps and seminars with local government were held.

Subsequently the collector of Surendranagar asked SWATI to carry out an orientation to RTI workshop for all PIO (public information officers) of Surendranagar district. One hundred and fifty two officers attended the workshop.