POLITICS OF KPIS

Harsh Nisar
Data Scientist – IFMR LEAD

CONTEXT

- Machine learning engineer in a corporate R&D lab in the past.
- Since last year working as M&E consultant for Ministry of Rural Development on behalf of IFMR LEAD.
- Work involves writing policy, dealing with gov-tech partners, building reports, generating data analysis and providing strategic inputs to bureaucracy.
- Following is introspection on designing MIS systems and Dashboards.

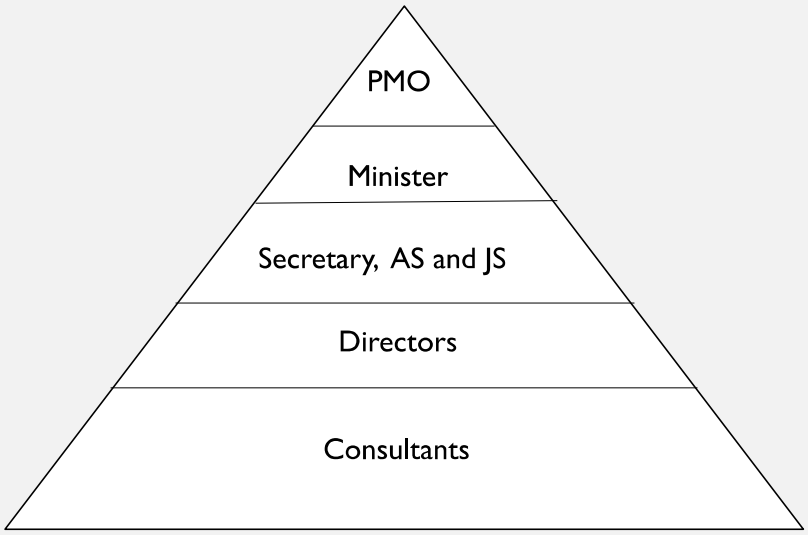
KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND REPORTS

- KPIs/MIS Reports become the lingua franca of operations and M&E activities.
- They frame and shape discussion around the scheme/program.
- They can be in spreadsheets, word/pdf tabulations, KPI dashboards, visualizations, theory of change etc.

There is a large push for data driven governance, dashboards etc.

But there are some inherent **structural issues with KPIs** regarding how they are designed and managed in Governments.

OPERATIONAL HIERARCHY



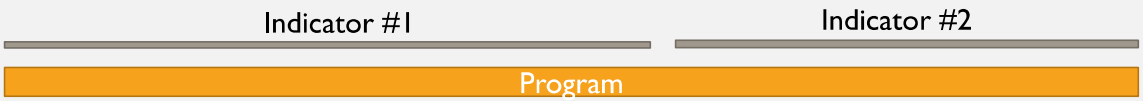
GOVERNMENT HIERARCHY

- As one moves up in the hierarchy, one has to look at many different schemes/programs.
- Need to divide time between each scheme/program.
- Want to know : Is *movement* happening?

Less time – 2-3 indicators per scheme.

WIDER THE INDICATOR, LESS DENSER THE INFORMATION

- Wider the indicators, more operational in nature they are.
- Total candidates trained, total toilets built, funds released v/s utilized.



DENSER INFORMATION

Devil lies in the detail.

Detailed indicators take **time** and **context** to consume.

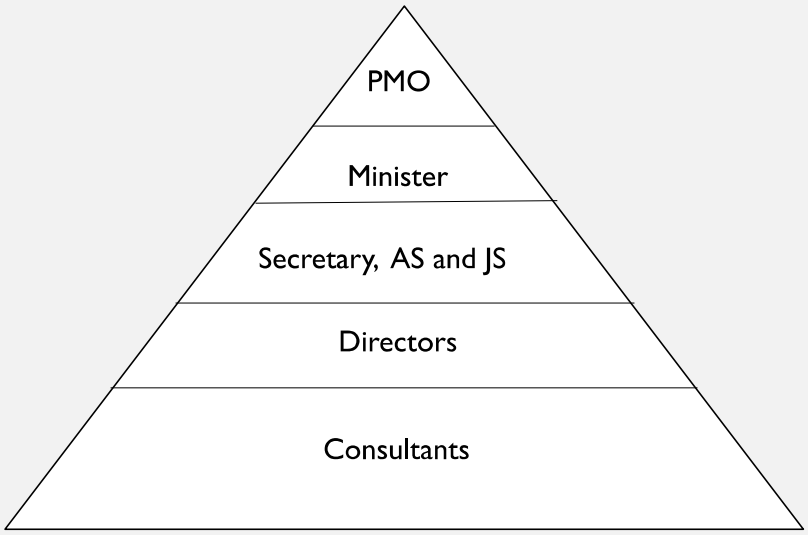
Indicators on **quality** of program are usually **dense.**

You need to **consume a certain number** of indicators **together** to be able to assess the health of the scheme and get to the reasons why something isn't happening.

HIERARCHY OF INDICATORS

- As you move lower in hierarchy, one has more time to look at **quality** and **micro** indicators.
- **But** the person you report to looks at different indicators, hence you devote energy in pushing ***their*** **indicators** v/s **yours**.
- Consecutive layers don't have executive powers. They rely on executive to make decisions.
- So even if they can look at more quality indicators, they are powerless.

OPERATIONAL HIERARCHY



DEVOLUTION OF POWER

- Age old concept – federalization.
- Data Driven Governance – more data, better decisions.
- That contradicts what we see in practice.
- Current structure only favours **operational indicators.**
- Government machinery needs to devolve power to utilize the power of data driven governance.
- Let consultants/officers in subsequent layer of hierarchy be competent enough to take decisions. Setup thematic heads.

OTHER PROBLEM WITH QUALITY INDICATORS

- Difficult to define in the first place.
- If not tracked, there is no incentive to put efforts to improve quality.
- So one defines inputs and outputs for proxies of quality → leads to **multiple narrow** indicators and **restrictive regulatory** inputs and large **outcomes**.
- Example: RTE and restrictions on classroom infrastructure.

IF ITS NOT A COLUMN IT WON'T HAVE DATA

- Often, indicators which are denser and important from a quality perspective either have missing data or data pointing to no work being done.
- "**Remove that column, its empty**" – that's the urge and push from stakeholders.
- But, if you don't keep the column, it won't be important in the future.
- Columns or KPI shape the conversation.

EMBEDDING QUALITY IN OPERATIONAL INDICATORS

- Embed quality inside the definition of operational indicator.
- For example, in an employment linked skilling scheme, the definition of "**Placement**" can be made dense.
- What do you think when you think placement? The act of being appointed in a job?
- But, to ensure quality, one can **embed** nuances into definition of placement itself.
- Example: Only considered as placement after spending 3 months in job.
- Note: it's called Placement only and remains an operational indicator.
- Initial fall-out, but **eventually gets normalized.**

THE FLIPSIDE

- When definition of indicator is different from what is envisaged normally.
- Example, what do you think when someone mentions that a village is electrified?
- You visualize certain reality, right?

LAYER OF OBFUSCATION

- Dashboards make an **interface separate from the data collection itself** and a **new later of obfuscation is introduced** that may hide significant weaknesses, assumptions and biases.
- Dashboards are **'sanitized, decontextualized, and necessarily partial**'.
- Like all visualisations of data, dashboards necessarily distort the information that they are attempting to present neutrally by **defining *how*** a variable is to be understood and by excluding any data which isn't compatible with this definition.

Source: Governance by Dashboards – A policy paper (DEMOS)

DEFINITION OF ELECTRIFIED VILLAGE

Prior to October 1997

A Village should be classified as electrified if electricity is being used within its revenue area for any purpose whatsoever.

After October 1997

A village will be deemed to be electrified if the electricity is used in the inhabited locality, within the revenue boundary of the village for any purpose whatsoever.

New definition of village electrification came into effect from the year 2004-05

If, Basic infrastructure such as Distribution Transformer and Distribution lines are provided in the inhabited locality as well as the Dalit Basti hamlet where it exists.

Electricity is provided to public places like Schools, Panchayat Office, Health Centres, Dispensaries, Community centres etc.

The number of households electrified should be at least 10% of the total number of households in the village.

ONLINE-OFFLINE WORLDS

- An act of building house has occurred.
- **Linking documentation with reporting of data.**
- Document collection of electricity bills, property tax being paid takes time. There is a natural lag.
- Should document collection be linked with data reporting?
- Lag will make numbers less and stakeholder will be under pressure for low progress.
- But if you start reporting "House established but without documents", you will **not pressurize** collection of documents.
- It's a conscious call which needs to be taken early on. Difficult to make the shift midway.

CONSUMER PRODUCER DYNAMICS

There are multiple tiers of monitoring.

Centre, State, Private Partners, Beneficiary.

MIS system are developed in top-down manner.

Thinking of sub-sequent tier as producer and filler of data.

Not necessarily consumer of the data itself.

User experience ends up being designed as such.

EXAMPLE IN CENTRALLY RUN SCHEMES

- Centre keeps asking for data from the State.
- Makes State fill numerous sheets on a monthly basis.
- Redundant adhoc requests for same data.
- State not *thought* of as consumer of data and user of data to monitor itself.
- Reports for Centre have aggregates over Districts, whereas State might be interested in village wise data.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

- One round of independent generation of KPIs (looking at program guidelines etc)
- Followed by participatory discussions with different beneficiaries (the ones monitoring and monitored) – especially the M&E and MIS teams.
- Be a part of reviews etc to understand the vocabulary and how people react and how and if they get away from being cornered.
- Make exception reports. If some data point is wrong.

POLICY FOR ICT OR ICT FOR POLICY

- Business consultants and IT systems changing the way policy is written.
- Schemes have multiple stakeholders and process with numerous back and forth.
- Service Level Agreements, timelines for action, numerous standard forms etc.
- From M&E perspective, each deviation is actionable.
- Business consultants help write these documents – so a lot of business practices follow.

PROBLEMS

- So at one end, the best is envisaged while ideating and writing policy, execution doesn't see the light of the day.
- Schemes written with business practices in mind, but eventually run by government machinery.
- Quality IT systems don't follow because of tendering and L1 procurement related issues.
- Monitoring of processes goes for a toss.
- Feeling that scheme too *complicated*

THANK YOU

"..it is highly reductionist atomizing complex, contingent relationships into simplified, one-dimensional measures that cannot provide a full and multidimensional picture of the city, even when combined into composite indices" (Astleithner and Hamedinger 2003)