Can technology boost development? E-Governance in India

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LSE's Dr Shirin Madon discusses the shortcomings of India's e-governance initiatives, which she argues privilege data collection over data analysis and cultural contextualisation.

On July 1, India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh (UP), will start to implement the National e-Governance plan. Under UP's e-governance system, citizens will be able to make online applications for pensions, procure copies of land registration forms and more. Despite the fanfare, UP's foray into e-governance is rather belated: the National e-Governance Programme was approved in May 2006 with the hope of making "all government services available to the common man in his locality."

Since then, Indian states have implemented various e-government initiatives in the name of efficiency, transparency and reliability despite an increasing number of complaints that e-governance remains technology-centric rather than citizen-centric. In May, for example, citizens in India's information technology (IT) hub, Bangalore, complained that the city government's website offered no opportunities for engagement or feedback.

Responding to India's enthusiasm for e-government initiatives, LSE's Dr Shirin Madon published a book titled e-Governance for Development: A Focus on Rural India. In the book, Madon points out that improving governance is a social rather than a technological activity and critiques e-governance initiatives that promise better efficiency and accountability without accommodating for the complex processes of development and governance.

Madon argues that the pace of implementing e-governance has been too rapid, leaving little time to consider the opportunity cost of such 'development' and creating a situation where data collection is privileged over data analysis and cultural contextualisation. Her arguments are based on research conducted on three e-governance projects in different social sectors in rural India: in Gujarat and Karnataka, Madon looked at e-administration projects aimed at improving planning and administration of rural development and health while in Kerala she documented a telecentre project providing information to a small farming community.

Here, Dr Madon discusses the persistence and shortcomings of e-governance initiatives in India aimed at improving governance and development.

Q. What drives e-governance policies? Is it technological determinism on the part of government officials? Or is it the political economy of e-governance, whereby government officials realise that IT projects are well funded and perpetuate a different kind of bureaucracy?

A. There are two elements to consider when it comes to government thinking about e-governance. One is that we'll get some money from donor agencies. The other is the belief that IT has to work to improve administration. It's a bit of a chicken and egg situation. The mandate of good governance is a powerful and strong one and it comes with money. At the same time, in the case of India, there is a blind faith that information technologies can improve governance. IT is almost regarded as something mythical—the attitude is, how can it not work?

Q. Why do you think the emphasis in development has come to fall on institutional transparency and efficiency as manifest in e-governance?

A. Soon after the Washington Consensus, the idea set in that it's not just about economic growth, but also about social development. This idea was developed through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Early on, one of the UN's MDG manifestoes emphasised IT and improved managerial practices in public administration within governance reform ideology. Once governance reform in this shape was packaged into the MDG gospel, it was very difficult for national- or state-level governments to challenge. Computerisation in India has been very partial – even now, there are still some manual systems that are used along with IT in individual departments. Still, challengers to the idea that IT is not the key to improving governance [in India] are not really forthcoming.

Q. In your book, you describe how the Indian public's interactions with the state are mediated through local political representatives and councillors. In this context, is the transparency offered by e-governance performative, pursued for the benefit of donor agencies and the media?

A. There is a tension between instrumental accountability and genuine accountability. There is an obvious way that computers can contribute to passing reports up through the hierarchy and there is a perception of that amounting to improved accountability. Then there is the accountability that India is genuinely putting in place through initiatives such as the social audits in Rajasthan and other parts of India and Village Health and Sanitation Committees (VHSCs)—efforts to create horizontal accountability structures and social spaces within which frontline workers, citizens or citizen reps are meeting.

In my projects I'm trying to investigate the accountability to the frontline workers. In the World Bank's annual World Development Report (2004), the bank calls for the use of procedures and mechanisms – today mediated through IT such as mobile telephony – to create a direct link between citizens and government. What gets left out, and what forms the long route to accountability as the World Bank suggests, is the enrolment of frontline workers, who have so far been pitifully marginalised.

In India, a process of decentralisation was initiated but never completed. During that process, there were signs of information being used for analysis at the local level, for example, by the District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs). But it all ended because the policy mandate changed and state governments became less involved in governance reform in the sense of strengthening the arm of district- and subdistrict-level government. Now it's governance reform in the sense of web-enabled applications, publishing information, citizen charters. It's not bad that these things were introduced, but others were left out.

Q. Is there still an urban bias in e-governance systems?

A. Yes. There is still a lot of emphasis on ICT infrastructure building – for example, broadband coverage – for improving governance through applications like bill payments. These are aimed at the middle-class population in urban and peri-urban areas. In the rural areas, there has been outreach through telecentres, but it's dotted. In Kerala, there is a critical mass of telecentres, but even in that state, there's only one district, Malappuram, where there are 200-odd telecentres that make it practically feasible to use them as a form of interaction with the state.

Q. At what level should there be better analysis of the data currently being collected to feed into e-governance systems?

A. Analysis should happen at the local level. In the case of health, at the Primary Health Centre (PHC) level. The medical officer and his staff are extremely knowledgeable people, but at this point in time the reports they're churning out are just coming up [through the system] as zeros and ones. No one reads them. But local people intuitively know what's happening and why, which is why the analysis part of improving local health has to be done at the local PHC level, or even below that.

Q. Is there an awareness at the local level that such analysis of information is needed?

A. We're still in the process of trying to make sense of this big term, 'community engagement'. Under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), the community-based monitoring exercise came and went—it was launched and it's already over. But in the Yelandur *taluk* of Karnataka, Karuna Trust, an NGO is continuing to invest in this idea. We've been collecting data about what happens at VHSC meetings for one year. We're hoping to find out whether the PHC people are motivated to do something with the report card data that's coming out to feed the e-governance systems. That's the level at which the sense-making [of the data] will happen.

Q. Since the publication of your book, have there been any improvements in health-related e-governance systems to reflect the complexity of rural health care service delivery?

A. Two different things are at play here. Regular reports tallying things such as dog bites, snake bites, cases of tuberculosis, etc. continue because they're mandated. No doubt, we need that data, but only if something is being done with it. But on the softer issues, there has been no substantial improvement. VHSCs are asking questions about the lack of improvement in rural health in particular districts, the cross-cutting issues related to school dropout rates, the best use for *panchayat* funding to improve rural health. But all this is being done on paper. There is nothing as yet in the health information system. The whole vision of improving accountability of the PHCs is to bring these two different kinds of information together in some form.

Q. Do you think media coverage of e-governance initiatives focuses enough on the citizen-oriented, service delivery aspects?

A. A discourse on this issue has been taken up more aggressively in recent years. NGOs such as   IT for Change are highlighting political economy concerns related to IT projects. In the future in India, research institutes and universities need to conduct evaluations of e-governance policy initiatives and investments. They also need to help build capacity and awareness through internships and workshops, both for practitioners in the field and those who need to step back and evaluate the overall effectiveness of e-governance.

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