

Social Accountability

The two words – ‘social’ and ‘accountability’ – have their distinct meanings. In a broad sense, ‘social’ refers to non-governmental, civil society organisations where people work on the basis of voluntarism and not compulsion or coercion. Accountability stands for submitting the ‘accounts’ of something/some activity entrusted to somebody. To put it simply, ‘accountability’ is the obligation of power-holders to take responsibility for their actions. In a straightforward sense, ‘accountability’ is answerability in respect of the performance of the tasks entrusted to somebody. In public administration context, it refers to the obligation on the part of public officials to report on the usage of public resources and answerability for failing to meet stated performance objectives. In conventional administrative practice, accountability is an in-house arrangement through which the designated supervisors hold the subordinates accountable for their assigned activities. The social dimension of accountability is a relatively recent phenomenon, making ‘administration’ accountable to outsiders – the society.

Social Accountability: No doubt governments can do a great deal on their own to improve accountability through actions such as strengthening top-down oversight, professionalizing staff through civil service reform, empowering internal comptrollers, establishing performance contracts and creating new independent public oversight agencies.

However, it is now being strongly argued that pro-accountability reform is much more effective when societal actors play a central role as well. This is what is being called ‘social accountability’. To follow the World Bank definition: Social Accountability is “an approach towards building accountability that relies on ‘civic engagement’, i.e. in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability”.

There is a growing literature now, in this context, on ‘civic engagement’ emphasizing society’s role in improving government accountability – a process increasingly being termed as “social accountability”¹. According to Ackerman (whose concept paper is often cited as a general reference on the subject), “We should welcome this paradigm shift as an opportunity to rethink accepted categories and as a chance to give a dynamic boost to development thinking”.

The effectiveness of conventional supply-side (government) mechanisms of accountability and elections (the principal traditional demand-side mechanism of accountability) has proved limited. Citizens need not be satisfied only with participation in five-yearly election processes.

To quote, in this context, the landmark document – World Development Report, 2004²:

“Citizens are combining electoral accountability and participation with what would traditionally have been considered the

cial accountability activities of the state. These initiatives address accountability at various levels. Some are aimed at strengthening voice in service delivery by enabling answerability and some at pushing further for enforceability. These initiatives and the state's response, employ a number of old and new tools, including tools based on information technology."

Government operations constantly impinge on the lives of citizens; hence, it is imperative that the citizens keep a close watch on normal government activities like licensing, imposition of varied regulations, distribution of many scheme-related benefits etc. at different levels. It needs to be closely watched whether the government agencies are actually operating keeping in mind the basic public interest concerns. By involving citizens in monitoring government performance, demanding and enhancing transparency and exposing government failures and misdeeds, social accountability mechanisms are potentially powerful tools against public sector corruption. In addition to improved government, social accountability 'empowers' citizens. 'Empowerment', in this context stands for 'a person's capacity to make effective choices; that is, as the capacity to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes'.³

The concept of social accountability underlines both the *right* and the corresponding *responsibility* of citizens to expect and ensure that government acts in the best interests of the citizens. As contrasted with within-organisation accountability, social accountability is 'external' yet governmental organisation is considered an integral part of the civil society within which it is embedded.

INTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY' DEFINED

Internal accountability may be looked as 'an approach towards building accountability

that relies on civic engagement'. Ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations participate directly or indirectly in exacting this kind of accountability. Social accountability initiatives include 'traditional' forms, such as public demonstrations, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism and the recent ones such as citizen report cards, participatory public policy making, public expenditure tracking and "efforts to improve the effectiveness of "internal" accountability mechanisms of the government, for example by involving citizens in public commissions and hearings and oversight committees."⁴ It has also been suggested that social accountability initiatives are most effective when these are 'institutionalized' and when the states' 'internal' (horizontal) accountability mechanisms are "more transparent and open to civic involvement." Transparency is thus inextricably linked to accountability. It has been found that the poor people are the greatest beneficiaries of effective social accountability initiatives. Social accountability activists also maintain that by involving citizens in initiatives geared towards demanding accountability of elected leaders, social accountability has the additional importance in respect of democratic strengthening.

Clearly, social accountability is about affirming and operating direct accountability relationships between the citizens and the state. Thus conceived, it refers to the broad range of actions and mechanisms, beyond voting, that citizens can use to hold the state's agencies to account. Participation of citizens in the formation of government is not the only method of democratic governance. It is perhaps much more important to ensure government's accountability to the lay citizens in course of actual functioning or governing.

Social accountability has both *intrinsic* and *instrumental* values. Its *intrinsic* importance is

reflected in (a) the strengthening of democratic relationships and (b) people's empowerment. Its **instrumental** value is reflected in (a) development effectiveness in terms of improved service delivery and (b) better governance (which is, obviously, a holistic concept). More importantly, social accountability introduces a salutary '**ethics of governance**' by deepening democracy and ridding society of the vices of corrupt practices.

TWO KINDS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Government accountability falls broadly into two classes: 'supply-side' accountability and 'demand-side' accountability. Discussions on accountability have traditionally been oriented toward supply-side or government-side accountability as against demand-side or people (citizens)-side accountability. Improving supply-side accountability involves using methods such as political checks and balances, administrative rules and procedures, auditing requirements and formal law-enforcing and adjudicating agencies like the police and the judiciary. All these devices represent 'top-down' accountability. Additionally, independent pro-accountability agencies like vigilance commission, ombudsmen etc. have been constituted in many countries to improve government accountability. Again, in some instances public institutions have been privatised or services have been contracted out to the private sector to bring market accountability in the public sector.

Despite introduction of many newer devices and institutional mechanisms to improve government (supply-side) accountability, more recently attention has been paid to the institution of 'demand (people)-side' accountability mechanisms. This has been necessitated by two reasons: one, perceived inadequacy and limited access of the 'supply-side' mechanisms of

accountability and two, to forge direct links between government agencies and the citizens and to 'empower' citizens. The basic objective of introducing 'demand-side' accountability mechanisms is to strengthen the voice and capacity of citizens, particularly the poor and the socially marginalized communities, to enable them to directly demand greater accountability and responsiveness from public officials and service providers. This trend toward instituting demand-side accountability mechanisms reflects a growing attention to issues of good governance, people's empowerment and rights-based approaches to development.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Five key steps are identified for enabling a social accountability process mechanism.

- **Mobilizing around an entry point:** This involves the identification of an entry point and developing of a strategy to address the problem. Potential strategies for addressing issues could include, for example, budget analysis/advocacy activities, tracking of inputs and/or expenditures, participatory evaluation of service delivery etc.
- **Building an information base:** A key process involves accessing or generating relevant information, both supply-side and demand-side, for building a credible evidence base. Relevant data/information must be interpreted and analyzed in order to be rendered operationally useful. This would be useful in produce meaningful findings that can be used in the dialogue with stakeholders.
- **Going Public:** A critical aspect for enabling social accountability is dissemination of information to the public and public debate around them. Effective communication strategies and mechanisms are

therefore, essential aspects of social accountability.

- **Building Coalitions:** Informing citizens of their rights and responsibilities, engaging their interest and mobilizing them to build coalitions and partnerships with different stakeholders are core aspects of social accountability. The need for collective action and the capacity of CSOs to facilitate and support such mobilization, especially that of the poor and marginalized are crucial to the success of social accountability initiatives.

- **Advocating and negotiating change:** The most crucial and challenging element of a social accountability strategy is to be able to elicit a response from public officials and effect real change. The most effective strategies usually involve direct interaction and negotiation with the concerned government counterparts and in some cases, the institutionalization of mechanisms for ongoing consultation and dialogue.

Social accountability approaches primarily include accessing information, making the voice of citizens heard and engaging in a process of negotiation for change.

Information:

A critical aspect of social accountability is accessing or generating relevant *information* and making it public. Both 'supply-side' and 'demand-side' information need to be garnered in support of credible evidence. The supply-side information from government and service providers and demand-side information from users of government services, communities and citizens have thus to be collected and analyzed. This process calls for transparency of government operations including capacity to produce and provide data and accounts for

accessing supply-side information such as policy statements, budget commitments and accounts, records of inputs, outputs and expenditures and audit findings. Initially, therefore, social accountability interventions would involve lobbying for enhanced information rights and public transparency. At the other end, a wide variety of participatory methods and tools—such as community scorecards, citizen report cards and participatory monitoring and evaluation techniques—have been developed to generate data on demand-side information. Efforts would have to be made alongside this to raise awareness and promote local-level mobilization and organisation.

Voice:

Giving *voice* to the needs, opinions and concerns of citizens is another key element of social accountability. There are many forceful strategies evolved by practitioners to strengthen citizen voice. These include creating spaces for public debate and platforms for citizen-state dialogue, building citizen confidence and rights awareness, facilitating the development of coalitions and alliances that can speak with a strong, united voice and making strategic use of modern and traditional forms of media. It has to be seen in this process that the voices of poorer and more marginal groups get due priority.

Negotiation:

To elicit favourable response from public officials and achieve real change is of crucial importance for which the *negotiation* processes have to be properly thought of. Among the several forms of such negotiations are community-level meetings with government officials or indirect, mediated forms of consultation and negotiation. Citizens groups have been found to employ a range of both informal and formal means of persuasion, pressure, reward and sanction with a view to

creating public pressure. Experience shows that often in many situations, the citizen's groups have opted for legal and/or institutional reforms to facilitate meaningful negotiation.

These core elements of social accountability have been used in real-life situations in various combinations in different places. Various alternative forms are being worked out and tried in field situations by creative civil society groups.

NEW GENERATION OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Traditionally, citizen or civil society-led efforts to hold government accountable have included actions such as public demonstrations, protests, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism and public interest lawsuits. In recent years, the expanded use of participatory data collection and analysis tools combined with enhanced space and opportunity for citizen/civil society engagement with the state have led to a new generation of social accountability practices. They emphasize a solid evidence base and direct dialogue and negotiation with government counterparts. These include, for example, participatory public policy-making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking and citizen monitoring and evaluation of public services, called 'social auditing' – being discussed later in this paper in some details.

The concept of social accountability underlines both the *right* and the corresponding *responsibility* of citizens to expect and ensure that government acts in the best interests of the people. The obligation of government officials to be accountable to citizens derives from notions of citizens' rights, often enshrined in constitutions and the broader set of human rights. Social accountability initiatives help citizens

understand their civic rights and play a proactive and responsible role in exercising those rights. In other words, opportunities to hold government accountable through the exercise of social accountability facilitate people's understanding of the governance processes and their eventual 'empowerment'. Social accountability, as it is exercised by the 'society', has the benefit of familiarizing the citizens with the processes of governmental operations. It 'empowers' citizens and has considerable educative value in terms of creating 'good citizens' dependent exclusively on state horizontal mechanisms as there could be instances of manipulation. It is equally undesirable to depend on civic organisations, as their efforts could be thwarted by the state. Therefore, the synergy between these two sectors is vital for producing best results in the public accountability regime.

Social accountability initiatives have proliferated all over the world in recent times. In India, *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS) or Workers and Peasants' Power Association, Rajasthan; Public Affairs Centre (PAC), Bangalore, are some of the important civic groups that have rendered valuable services in holding state and local government officials accountable. India's Right to Information law has facilitated greatly civil society's efforts to hold the administrators accountable. There were many administrative abuses in the past (and these are still persisting) such as non-payment of wages or under-payment, personal aggrandizement of council officials and so forth committed by local bodies and grassroots government officials against the rural poor. The non-political movement known as *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS) was launched to face these abuses and rectify them with aggressive local people's activist postures. Earlier there have been diverse strategies such as sit-ins, rallies, lobbying with the government.

like music, puppets and street theatre etc. After prolonged struggle, the MKSS became victorious when the government of Rajasthan incorporated the government notification that the people would have access to the records on Panchayat expenditure and can have photocopy records. The government finally enacted the Right to Information Act in 2000.

In Rajasthan, the MKSS used public hearings through which the discrepancies between what was written on paper and what was given to the rural labourers could easily be identified. Through this, the labourers got fair wages, fictitious names on the pay roll could be identified and other kinds of anomalies could be detected. The MKSS message has now inspired many Indian states where the NGOs have been pressing for 'social audit' and access for information under the right to information law. The Government of India eventually passed the Right to Information Act in 2005.

In India, it is common knowledge that most citizens, particularly the poor, face serious problems relating to the delivery of essential public services such as water, electricity and health etc. In view of recurring mismanagement and corruption, smaller movements have been organised in the past against unresponsive and corrupt public officials. In this context, the role of the PAC, Bangalore, deserves special mention. PAC, a Bangalore-based NGO, came forward with the imaginative idea to improve civic services delivery system of essential public services. They introduced what is known as 'report cards' that seek citizens' opinions about their real-life experiences in getting day-to-day essential local public services. These reports are widely publicized in local media and through other methods to pressurize the local authorities to improve services delivery. PAC now conducts

surveys using report cards for all essential services on all-India basis.

RELATION WITH TRADITIONAL MECHANISMS

Conventional accountability mechanisms are not to be replaced by social accountability mechanisms. Rather the latter need to be viewed as complementary to conventional internal (government) mechanisms of public accountability. Usually, governments have internal control mechanisms to ensure accountability of public servants. These may be identified as follows:

- (i) Constitutional mechanisms such as CAG audit, separation of powers, Public Accounts Committee and so on;
- (ii) Political mechanisms such as debates and legislative investigative commissions, media reporting and political party agitations etc.;
- (iii) Fiscal mechanisms including formal systems of auditing and financial accounting;
- (iv) Administrative mechanisms including hierarchical control and reporting, norms of public sector probity, public service codes of conduct, rules and procedures regarding transparency and public oversight
- (v) Legal mechanisms like corruption control agencies (vigilance commission), ombudsmen and the judiciary.

Ideally, the two sets of accountability mechanisms – internal (within formal governmental set-up) and external (citizens/civil society) – mechanisms of accountability – should be mutually reinforcing. Social accountability includes efforts to enhance citizen knowledge and use of conventional mechanisms of accountability (for example,

through public education about legal rights and available services) and efforts to improve the effectiveness of internal accountability mechanisms through greater transparency and civic engagement (for example, citizen and community participation in public commissions, hearings, advisory boards and oversight committees). Strengthening legislative oversight and links between parliamentarians, citizens and civil society organisations are also important ways to enhance social accountability.

At the ground level, the socio-economic and political contexts of most developing countries pose in reality, serious constraints in realizing the objectives of social accountability. There are many evidences to suggest that even the best objectives of social accountability are being thwarted by unfavourable social and political contexts. In the developing world extreme

organisations and the state have often to work in tandem. Since the efforts of local civic agencies can be thwarted by unhelpful state agencies, the synergy between these two sectors is vital for producing best results in this area. In fact, the civil society's attempts to improve the performance of public (government) projects need to be appreciated by the political leaders at the highest level. Once cooperation is assured from the highest level, normally, lower level officials come forward to extend help and assistance in the functioning of local civic groups.

CROSS-CULTURAL EVIDENCES

Over the last two decades or so, social accountability initiatives have proliferated all over the world. A number of major social accountability initiatives undertaken in different

in the flow of financial resources or inputs. Examples include participatory tracking of primary education expenditures in Uganda, Jan Sunwais or participatory audits in Rajasthan and Delhi, People's Estimate in Andhra Pradesh (for monitoring and execution of rural public works), etc.

Citizens' Surveys/Citizen Report Cards:

These are survey methods where feedback from individual citizens is aggregated to provide report cards and survey reports on a range of issues. These could pertain to service delivery assessments, opinion polls, awareness exercises etc. While surveys have been used extensively the world over, their use to generate Citizen Report Cards have been made in India and Philippines.

Citizen's Charters: A charter is an explicit statement of what a public agency is ready to offer as its services, the rights and entitlements of the people with reference to these services and the remedies available to them should problems and disputes arise in these transactions. Citizen's Charters have been used in various departments at the Centre and States within varying degree of success.

Community Score Cards: These are used to assess service delivery in a participatory manner at the community level. Typically, the process involves ratings of service delivery by users and self-assessments by providers who then participate in an interface meeting to identify and sort issues and differences.

In addition, other important methods are campaigns for electoral reforms, public interest litigations and social audit.

WHAT IS SOCIAL AUDIT (SD)?

As earlier mentioned, in recent times 'social audit' has emerged lately as a powerful tool to bring about governmental accountability to

the lay people. Social auditing is a process that enables an organisation to assess and demonstrate its social, economic and environmental benefits and limitations. It is a way of measuring the extent to which an organisation lives up to the shared values and objectives it has committed itself to.

It provides an assessment of the impact of an organisation's non-financial objectives through systematically and regularly monitoring its performance and the views of its stakeholders.

Social auditing requires the involvement of stakeholders including employees, clients, volunteers, financing agencies, contractors, suppliers and local residents interested in the local organisation and the local development schemes under review. Stakeholders are defined as those persons or organisations who have an interest in, or who have invested resources in, the organisation.

Social audits are generated by the organisation themselves and those directly involved. A person or panel of people external to the organisation undertakes verification of the social audit's accuracy and objectivity.

WHAT DOES SD INVOLVE?

The social auditing process requires an intermittent but clear time commitment from a key person within the organisation. This social auditor forges links with others in the organisation and designs, co-ordinates, analyses and documents the information collected during the process.

Social auditing information is collected through research methods that include social bookkeeping, surveys and case studies. The objectives of the organisation are the starting point from which indicators of impact are determined, stakeholders identified and research tools designed in detail. For this purpose, local NGOs may be of considerable help to mobilize

local people and motivate them to undertake the SD exercise. The local people need to be told about the nature and importance of SD and they have to be trained in the methods and techniques of SD. In other words, the local people being the chief stakeholder have to take the lead with, of course, help and assistance of some NGOs who know the area's governance system and its development activities.

The collection of information is an on-going process, often done in 12-month cycles and resulting in the organisation establishing social bookkeeping and the preparation of an annual social audit document/report.

Experience has shown that it is important to provide training to the social auditor as well as mentoring during the first few years. If well facilitated, social auditors from different organisations can become self-supporting for subsequent years. Also, local people with support from active local NGOs, can pursue social audit as a regular institutionalized (as against one-shot) mechanism to closely monitor and evaluate local development programmes and projects of government.

HOW COULD IT BE OF USE TO LOCAL COMMUNITY?

A social audit can complement an organisation's annual financial audit by providing clear and succinct information on performance against social objectives. The results can be fed into the organisation's strategic review and planning processes to improve overall performance and social impact. It has been shown to increase accountability of the organisation to its stakeholders and to enhance democratic practice.

The *advantages of social audit* can now be synoptically put as

- Community training on participatory local planning,
- Encouragement and stimulation of local participative democracy,
- Facilitating community participation,
- Social inclusion of disadvantaged groups,
- Experimentation in collective decision-making and sharing of responsibilities,
- Developing human resources and local 'social capital'

To elucidate further the concept of 'social audit', it is the process of vigilance and monitoring kept by the society to ensure that the public money is being spent in the most prudent way adhering to all the stipulated guidelines. The major principle that guides social audit is that it should be done by the society itself, of course, with assistance from the trained people. The process of the audit itself should act as a process of capacity-building of the citizens. Independent people – bona fide NGOs and experienced trainers who do not have any interest in the implementation of any local development scheme should help the Society in conducting social audit. There should be well-worked-out mechanisms to address the grievances or findings that come out as a result of the social audit. The findings of the social audit should be taken seriously by the administration at the highest level and corrective actions have to be initiated immediately on receipt of the report of the Social Audit. To reiterate the main objectives of social audit are to:

1. Assess the physical and financial gaps between needs and resources available for local development;
2. Create awareness among beneficiaries and providers of local social and productive services;
3. Increase efficacy and effectiveness of local development programmes;
4. Examine the various policy decisions,

- keeping in view stakeholder interests and priorities, particularly of rural poor
5. Estimate the opportunity cost for stakeholders for not getting timely access to public services.

EFFECTIVENESS

It is not always easy to conduct social audit without community preparedness on one side and institutional help and cooperation on the other. Therefore, to be effective, the social auditor must have the right to:

1. Seek clarifications from the implementing agency about any decision-making, activity, scheme, income and expenditure incurred by the agency;
2. Consider and scrutinize existing schemes and local activities of the agency
3. Access registers and documents relating to all development activities undertaken by the implementing agency or by any other government department.

This requires transparency in the decision-making and activities of the implementing agencies. In a way, social audit includes measures for enhancing transparency by enforcing the right to information in the planning and implementation of local development activities.

APPROPRIATE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

It might be advisable to statutorily endow the Gram Sabha (gram sansad, in the case of West Bengal) with power

- to inspect all public documents related to budget allocations, list of beneficiaries, assistance under each scheme, muster rolls, bills, vouchers, accounts, etc., for scrutiny;
- examine annual statements of accounts and audit reports;

- discuss the report on the local administration of the preceding year;
- review local development for the year or any new activity programme;
- establish accountability of functionaries found guilty of violating established norms/rules;
- suggest measures for promoting transparency in identifying, planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating relevant local development programmes
- ensure opportunity for the rural poor to voice their concerns while participating in social audit meetings.

Statutory 'social audit committees' may be constituted (although this might be violable of the principle of voluntarism) at the level of each tier of the PRI. These committees need not be permanent and can be set up depending on the nature of programmes/schemes to be audited. The members can be drawn locally from among the different programme stakeholders. The services of retired functionaries of different organisations, teachers or persons of impeccable integrity and known expertise residing in the vicinity of the organisations may be taken on board as facilitators and members of such committees. Efficient and locally acceptable NGOs may come forward to 'train', 'advise' and assist social audit groups and committees to make social audit a success.

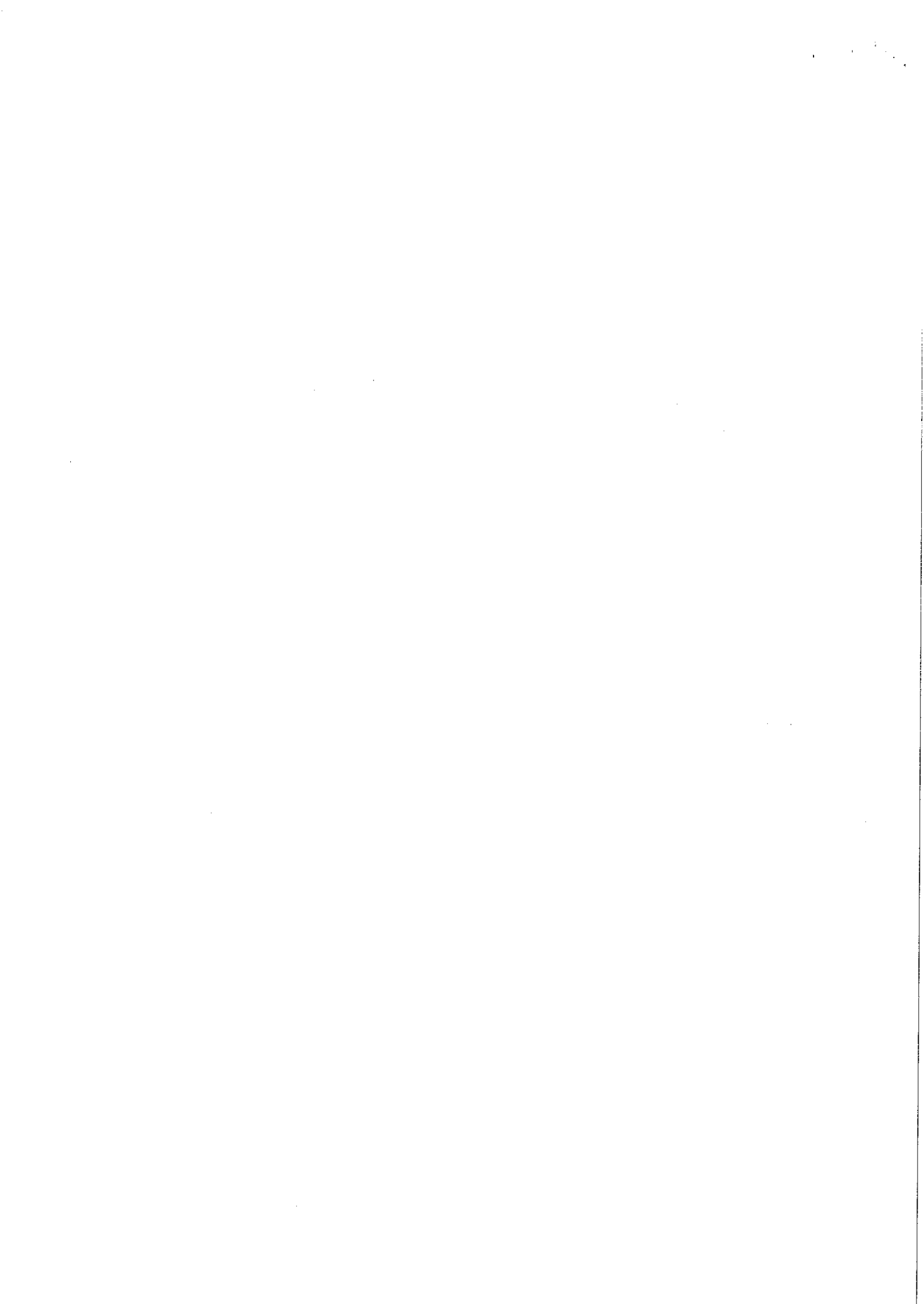
CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Accountability is acknowledged as the heart of democratic governance. Over the years, various strategies have been used to improve government accountability. It is now being increasingly felt that to remove the distance between the government and the governed and

to accommodate rising people's demand for direct participation in 'governance'. It is not enough to rely merely on traditional intra-organisational accountability mechanisms. Wherever feasible, the governance process needs to be opened up and made accessible to the 'public'. Social accountability may thus be looked at as a timely institutionalization of a long felt demand for openness, transparency and accessibility.

REFERENCES

1. See, in this context, the excellent foundational work of Ackerman on 'Social Accountability. John M. Ackerman, *Social Accountability for the Public Sector: A Conceptual Discussion*, January 18, 2005.
2. *World Development Report, 2004, Making Services Work for Poor People*, A Co-publication of World Bank and Oxford University Press. See particularly Chapter 5 on 'Citizens and Politicians'.
3. Malena, Forster and Singh, *Social accountability An Approach Paper*, World Bank, 2004.





Right to Information

James Madison writing in 1822 gave eloquent expression to the urgent need for 'popular

particularly in societies that are undergoing a process of democratic transition and/or whose

There is universal recognition now that the people's right to information is the foundation of a healthy and functioning democracy. The cardinal element in the formation of democratic societies – the element most feared and suppressed by totalitarian rulers – has been an informed and active citizenry. Experience tells us that the more the citizens know, the better prepared and more motivated they are to effectively participate in the decisions that affect their lives and property and their physical and economic well-being. The people's right to official information is an indispensable element of a functioning democracy. The ideal of a 'government by the people' presupposes that the people have access to information on matters of public concern in order to effectively exercise its governing power. The free flow of information about the affairs of government paves the way for debate in public policy and fosters accountability in government.

The people's right to official information is also essential in economic life. A free flow of official information results in better government policies. It provides the institutional foundation for a more responsive government planning by enhancing the capacity of the public to provide timely feedback to government. The availability of official information widens the base for the generation of more knowledge about key development issues, not only by researchers and academic institutions, but also by the public at large. It promotes constructive and informed debate between and among government and stakeholders and builds consensus around policy objectives and design. All these promote more informed government interventions supported by a solid and broad-based constituency.

NEED FOR THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION

On the question of why the right to information, apart from what has been stated above, certain

strong grounds have been advanced for its promotion. First and foremost, availability of this right makes for the empowerment of the people who would otherwise be ignorant about the processes of governance. Second, the right to information creates conditions for 'open governance' which is the foundation of democracy. By contrast, secrecy in governmental functioning tends to promote corruption and misuse or abuse of public authority. Third, the right to information is an investment in people's trust in government which is the real basis of democratic governance. Fourthly, what J.S. Mill regarded as the educating influence of local government is the product of openness affording access to government departments and documents and thus enabling citizens to acquire knowledge about the goings on in government. Fifth, the right to information, by removing unnecessary secrecy surrounding the decision-making process in government makes the citizens 'co-sharers' in public policy making and administration. This helps improve the quality of overall governance in public interest. Sixth, grassroots democracy – the government at the cutting edge level – becomes much more authentic and people-centric when people participate directly and observes at firsthand how the government functions in reality. Participative governance is a sure safeguard against 'secret' government. Last but not the least, people's right to information brings about a major change in the 'quality' of government by making it really 'public'. People's easy access to information about governmental operations as a matter of 'right' makes these operations open and transparent. It ensures accountability and responsiveness to people's needs and demands.

UN AND DONOR AGENCIES

Currently, international pressure, particularly from

the UN and donor agencies, has been mounting on country governments for making governance more open, transparent and accountable. The UN General Assembly's Resolution 59 (1) adopted at the 65th Plenary Meeting on December 14, 1946 reads as under:

"Freedom of Information is a fundamental human right and the touchstone for all freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated."

In this connection, the provision of another historic declaration – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948 is worth our quotation:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers (Article 19)."

WORLD BANK POLICY

We can quote in this context an excerpt from a paper prepared by the World Bank Information Centre:

"People have a right to information from public institutions and a right to participate in the development policies and projects that affect their lives. Transparency in World Bank operations will help to reduce corruption, not in the least by helping foster a 'demand side' of governance. Key concerns and recommendations related to transparency and corruption:

- The World Bank's **Disclosure Policy** provides an important framework for the timely release of information about the institution's policies and operations. We are pleased that the Bank is reviewing this important policy in 2007 and urge Bank management to require in-depth

public consultations on the policy document in the coming months.

- The Bank should subscribe to the **Global Transparency Initiative's 'Transparency Charter for International Financial Institutions'** to show its clear commitment to better governance and accountability.
- **Contract and revenue transparency** is critical to create an environment conducive for civil society and media to monitor revenue-generating projects throughout implementation. This is particularly important in high risk sectors like extractive industries. The GAC framework should explicitly mention the importance of promoting **contract transparency** as a critical step forward to reducing corruption in high-risk sectors and projects. Moreover, the World Bank should adopt the principles put forward by the Publish What You Pay Coalition which is copied below for reference.
- **Greater openness and information disclosure throughout the project cycle is critical** – from project preparation through Board approval to project completion and evaluation. In particular, the release of project supervision and evaluation documents facilitates meaningful civil society monitoring of Bank operations. The Bank should release more information during project implementation to the public and this should be a major area of focus in the forthcoming review of

UNDP POLICY'

For UNDP, the right to information is a key underpinning for work in democratic governance and is vital for promoting 'open governance'

and the accountability of public decision makers as well as for strengthening transparency, participation and the rule of law. The right to information is not only fundamental for an open and democratic society but is a key weapon in the fight against poverty and in accelerating human development. In 2006, over 68 countries had comprehensive laws to facilitate access to state records and many more are in the process of enacting such a legislation. This illustrates the growing recognition on the part of governments of the importance of access to information for enhancing democratic engagement, building confidence in government institutions and strengthening their credibility and effectiveness. However, in many States, including democracies, people are routinely denied access to official information, indeed information that should be in the public domain. Only 32 of the countries in which UNDP is present have laws requiring the disclosure of government records. The UNDP Oslo Governance Centre convened a seminar on the right to information to explore how UNDP can strengthen its support to promoting and protecting the right to information in countries where UNDP is working. The seminar built on several guidance materials and resources that have been developed under UNDP's Access to Information service line, particularly the Practical Guidance Notes on Right to Information Programming and Measuring the Impact of Right to Information Programmes.

Key points that emerged from the seminar are:

1. The right to information is a cross-cutting area that contributes to the overall strengthening of democratic governance, primarily by increasing participation (including CSOs and media), accountability, transparency, access and distribution of power and delivery of public services.

2. The right to information is of vital importance to poor and marginalised people.
3. UNDP can support right to information in a number of ways without necessarily having a dedicated right to information programme but it is critical that right to information is systematically integrated into all programming (not just governance), country office (CO) policy advice and other CO activities such as multi-stakeholder dialogue meetings.
4. There is a real need for COs to develop right to information strategies to support their poverty reduction/governance programming. The Common Country Assessment (CCA) or equivalent should include an analysis of the Access to Information (ATI) context which would inform such strategies.
5. Responding to right to information challenges concerns both the 'supply' and 'demand' sides of information. Capacity and capabilities are central factors for both. On the supply side, UNDP can be most directly engaged working upstream. The right to information is a cultural and service delivery issue (like the delivery of other state public goods and services).

CHRI WORKSHOP

Just before the framing of the Right to Information Act by the Government of India, a workshop was organised on the theme by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) at New Delhi on September 7, 2001. CHRI's position in this regard was explained 'as a right that was central to the realisation of all other human rights, as a tool for fighting corruption, for ensuring transparency and accountability and most of all for enabling

informed participation by the people'. The ideas that came out of the workshop were as follows:

Donor's to look at relevance of Right to Information:

- There was a feeling among the participants that the Right to Information was a new area for NGO's and Donor's and these groups need to look at relevance of the Right to Information for their work.

Public Education: - There is a need to build greater awareness on the issue of right to information and take the issue to a wider audience and only then will the government be forced to act. The media should be used in order to develop awareness; in addition Right to Information is also the responsibility of the

legislations on right to information have referred to only access to government held information, only the South African law on the point tries to bring in the private sector within the purview of the law.

Providing access to relevant information: - There is a need to provide relevant information that people can use, merely providing access to government information that no one can understand will not be useful for anyone. Organisations must get involved in processing information that people can use and this information should be accessible to people in a timely manner. Budget analysis for instance is a very useful exercise, organisations involved in this should do greater

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E-Government

The discussion on E-governance needs to be contextually placed. Faced with new challenges in the wake of rapid social and technological changes and mounting public demands for more efficient and transparent public administration, governments worldwide are now striving hard to transform and reinvent the government systems. The compelling objective is to deliver efficient and cost-effective services, information and knowledge through innovative information and communication technologies. To quote Guido Bertucci, Director of United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: "Public sector reforms throughout the world embodying ICTs are part of an on-going effort to build trust in defining the terms of a social contract between the diverse groups that make up a society. New forms of dialogue and collaboration among public, private and civil society organisations enhance transparency and accountability that can create conditions of fair and open competition while expanding access so that everyone can participate and benefit from today's knowledge-based economy. E-inclusion, one of the many pre-occupations of modern government, can broaden access to social and economic opportunities, thereby creating new markets in developing countries." (Newsletter of DPADM/UNDESA, Issue 1, No. 113, 2007)

E-GOVERNMENT VS. E-GOVERNANCE

In this context, two terms that are now

being frequently used are E-government and E-governance. Their meanings need to be distinguished at the outset to dispel doubts about terminologies in use. 'Government' as the action arm of state has been a familiar concept; by contrast, the term 'governance' is a relatively new entrant in public administration vocabulary. It stands for, to quote the World Bank's formulation, 'the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised, this includes the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced, the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies and the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them'. Implicit in this formulation is an attempt to extend the traditional understanding of 'rule and regulation' beyond formal machineries of 'government' and include other social actors like the private sector and the civil society organisations as co-actors in steering the processes of social life.

Following the World Bank/UNDP definition (which has gained more or less universal acceptance), *E-government* can be defined as the application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) – particularly Internet-based information technology – by government agencies to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability of government. In this definition 'technology' is the means and efficiency, transparency etc. are the consequences

that are expected to flow from the use of ICT. Contrastingly, *E-governance* is about the use of ICT to support the guiding and steering of an organisation – be it a private agency or a civil society organisation (other than government) to achieve its goals. In the political context, *E-governance* is about the use of ICT to steer society and promote public interest. For example, 'e-procurement' that is concerned with the use of ICT to support the purchasing departments of public or government agencies falls in the category of *E-government*. By contrast, an ICT application designed to help lobbyists (e.g. farmers, industrialists etc.) to participate efficiently in the political processes, like influencing a public subsidy policy or new electricity tariff would fall in the category of 'E-governance'.

Following the common practice, however, we will be using the term 'E-government' to connote the application of ICT to public administrative purposes in the public interest. Basically, *E-governance* is distinguished from *E-government* with a view to highlighting the democratic qualities of the new ICTs. These ICTs support not only the activities of governments, but also foster new forms of political mobilisation and multi-stakeholder participative governance.

DEFINING E-GOVERNMENT

'E-Government' (as defined by the World Bank Group) refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses and other arms of government. These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen

empowerment through access to information, or more efficient government management. The resulting benefits can be less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth and/or cost reductions.

Traditionally, the interaction between a citizen or business and a government agency took place in a government office. With emerging information and communication technologies it is possible to locate service centres closer to the clients. Such centres may consist of an unattended kiosk in the government agency, a service kiosk located close to the client, or the use of a personal computer in the home or office.

E-government aims to make the interaction between government and citizens, government and business enterprises and inter-agency relationships more friendly, convenient, transparent and inexpensive.

BACKGROUND

The United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration, at its first session held from 22 to 26 July, 2002 discussed at length the issue of capacity of the public sector to support the creation and application of knowledge, innovation and technology for development. Two guiding thoughts of the Committee have been: (a) public sector organisations must become 'learning organisations' that are recognised as strong and strategic organisations; and (b) capacity-building in support of state governance would require the harnessing of the power of information and communication technologies in support of innovation.

The Committee urged upon the member countries to shift public administration towards a culture of performance of the whole organisation, mission and results, lifelong learning innovation, life employability with safeguards

horizontal teams and networks and an outward orientation towards all segments of society. In this connection, the committee recommended capacity-building by capturing knowledge and supporting innovation through the building of a learning infrastructure, connectivity and network. Public sector organisations would thus encourage transparency and accountability, improve service delivery and provide services in a citizen-centred way. This process would forge a link between governance and transformative innovation in public administration supported by knowledge, innovation and technology – more specifically ICT.

The United Nations Millennium Declaration (2000) provides another important background for this analysis. Calling upon member countries to promote 'good governance', the Declaration laid emphasis on the need for strengthening capacity to implement the principles and practices of democracy and the rule of law and to work collectively for more inclusive political processes, allowing genuine participation by all citizens and ensuring the right of the public to have access to information. All this places ICT application in public administrative operations in the position of a servant of people-centred, democratic and participative governance as a means for human development.

THE MORAL FRAMEWORK

The United Nations World Public Sector Report (WPSR) – E-government at the Cross roads – describes the moral purpose of E-government as a public administration which is in the process of transforming its internal and external relationships with the use of modern ICT, which is about communication among people being the quintessence of human society. In the context of public administration, e-government is bound to have an impact on the creation

of public value – a notion rooted in people preferences. E-government, to quote the WPS is justified if it enhances the capacity of public administration to increase the supply of public value – the outcome of a high quality of life. E-government development 'must be put within the context of a vision of the kind of society with which the people want to identify and make part of their life experience'.

CONSTRAINTS AND FACILITATORS

Public administration being a mix of political will and guidance on the one hand and bureaucratic professionalism on the other, the application of ICT has to reckon with the complexities that are inherent in the structure and processes of public management. Government administration has unique characteristics like the pivotal role of merit-based and trained bureaucracy and of politically influenced decisions that are not always driven by efficiency or productivity considerations. Also, public sector organisations are subject to certain constraints of financial/legal/regulatory, contractual, personnel and institutional nature. Under the circumstances, ICT is much more challenging in the public sector. It often makes ICT infrastructure investment decisions. Often, the lure of ICT becomes a kind of fashion and organisations try to 'mimic' others who have already introduced ICT. In this connection, interesting indicators may be quoted which have been classified as (a) barriers, (b) inhibitors, (c) drivers (d) enablers.¹

Barriers: Certain impediments or road blocks can be identified that stand in the way of introduction of ICT in a public organisation. These are

- Inadequacy or lack of fund provision
- Poor infrastructure

- Insufficient or non-existent skilled personnel
- Bureaucratic tendencies (rule-following as against work achievement)
- Dominance of unhelpful, narrow, self-interested politics

Inhibitors: These are factors that *ab initio* make it difficult to induct ICT in the organisation. These are

- Absence of ICT departments and mobility of ICT champions
- Lack of an appropriate legal and regulatory framework
- Poor data systems maintenance
- Lack of staff motivation
- Lack of a coordinated approach to organisational development

Drivers: These are support systems for ICT introduction consisting of

- Government and political support
- ICT champions within the organisation
- E-government strategy formulated by the top management
- Internal pressure and rising user expectations
- External pressure, technological change and modernisation drive

Enablers: These are facilitators creating the right ambience for ICT introduction and use, as listed below:

- Availability of trained staff within the organisation
- Easy engagement of outside consultants
- Positive attitudes toward ICT as a real aid to organisational development

BROAD OBJECTIVES

E-government through planned Introduction of ICT creates a web of connectivity or 'networking' that has the following relational dimensions:

(a) Intra-organisational connectivity or within organisation networking, (b) connectivity between government and citizen, (c) government to business connectivity, (d) government to employee connectivity (e) government to government connectivity.

To elaborate the points earlier made, the benefits of ICT application can be synoptically identified as:

- Organisational efficiency enhancement
- Improved services delivery – better service, more convenient, more reliable and lower cost
- Greater participation of citizens in government affairs
- Lower transaction costs
- Helpful in building trust between government and citizen
- Providing greater people's access to government information
- Making government more accountable by making the operations more transparent
- Enhanced control of fraud and reduction of corruption
- Providing wider development opportunities, especially benefiting rural and traditionally underserved communities and marginalised sections of society (e.g. Women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes)
- Challenging existing ways of doing work
- Creating a general climate of organisation-wide reform
- Harnessing organisational energy/resource-

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM

As already pointed out, E-government should not be looked at as a standalone kind of effort to bring about some patchy changes in the organisational work processes. To optimise the efforts and costs involved in the introduction of ICTs, E-government initiatives in any country should advisably be cast within the broader framework of the country's administrative revamping efforts. In this context, the appointment of the Second Administrative Commission in India (2005), readily comes to mind. The Government of India, in appointing the Commission, asked for the 'preparation of a detailed blueprint for revamping the public administration system'. The Commission is 'required to suggest measures to achieve a proactive, responsive, accountable, sustainable and efficient administration for the country at all levels of the government'. What is noteworthy in our context is that the Commission has to inter alia consider (a) citizen-centric administration and (b) promoting E-governance. Thus, E-governance has not been thought of in insular term as a kind of one-time change through the introduction of ICTs. Introduction of ICTs has very rightly been made an integral part of wider and systemic governmental reform.

E-GOVERNMENT AS A NEW PARADIGM

The question that can be raised at this point is: how the introduction of ICTs in public administration is going to bring about a transformation of the nature of traditional public administration? Four stages in the evolution of

public administration can be identified in this connection:

- The Bureaucracy Model with which we are familiar has been undergoing change with emphasis basically on internal structural, operational reform and individual officers' work style transformation through the introduction of the ICTs.
- The Information Management Model that is steadily emerging seeks to forge a link between citizens and government in terms of electronic public service.
- The Citizen Participation Model which is an emerging way of doing things creates conditions for strong citizen's participation in government decision-making process through two-way interactions with an emphasis on information technology as a device to promote transparency and invigorate democracy.
- Finally, the E-governance Model with multiple transactions through widest networking between diverse social entities and all political and administrative activities. This model represents a virtual merger of E-governance and E-government by synergising the efforts of all social actors including 'government'.²

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