Full Circle of Governance: How to Leverage Age Old Organic Structure of Governance

Vishal Singh[1]

ABSTRACT

Developments which took place after and during Industrial revolution and led to decentralization of governance for the sake of better governance, have overgrown its utility and has actually started degrading the whole performance of the government. At this juncture, ICT provides us the opportunity in terms of providing possibility of going back to the organic nature of governance and providing an actual seamless and single view of government to citizens. ICT can be harnessed to create seamless virtual backend and provide single window of government to citizens. This can be done, once we realize this fact, and start looking at various departments/ ministries agencies functionaries of government as different channels for delivery of the same thing; i.e. services to citizens.

1. Introduction

The term Governance deals with the processes and systems by which an organization or society operates. The word derives from Latin origin that suggests the notion of "steering". The World Bank defines Governance as the exercise of political authority and the use of institutional resources to manage society's problems and affairs.

In general terms, Governance occurs in 3 broad ways:
  a. Through top down methods that primarily involve governments and state bureaucracy,
  b. The use of market mechanisms where market principles of competition are employed to allocate resources while operating under government regulation,
  c. Through networks involving Public Private Partnerships (PPP) or with the collaboration of community organizations.

A fair Governance implies that these mechanism function in a way that allows the executives to respect the rights and interests of the stakeholders (the governed). So, good Governance has to be based on Coherence, Accountability, Participation, Effectiveness and Openness. It involves political leadership and a strong responsibility on the part of institutions to ensure a consistent approach with in a particular system.

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[1] National Institute of Smart Government, Department of Information Technology, Government of India, Hyderabad, India (Email josecy.vsingh@gmail.com).

2. Background – From Where it Started?

If we briefly look at the history of governance, it evolved with the evolution of social structures and society amongst human beings. The early structure of governance was centralized and every decision use to flow from one point that is the ruler or the head man. He was seen and perceived as the single source for everything. Later with increasing complexity of governance and infusion of democratic setups and republics, decision making began to get delegated to different people and idea of decentralized governance started picking up. Some see the strains of participatory governance in certain bands and tribes like "IRAQUOIS" Confederacy. Direct democracy was practiced in Ancient Athens where 30000 citizens were eligible to vote. The seeds of participatory governance were sown in the Roman republic.

In India, the concept of people's voice or people's moral sanction to monarchy was seen as a given in Good Governance. So be it Rama of Ramayana, Asoka and Akbar and even Chanakya—the focus was actually or pretending- 'People Centered'. Even during these old representations of participatory and decentralized governance, for a very long period of time, there use to be points of convergence and things were controlled at few nodal points, which were not many in numbers. Starting from here began an era of complete decentralization and specialization as an induction effect of industrial revolution. More and more activities and decision making authority started getting decentralized and diffused. It brought lots of benefits also, like more specialized, informed and prompt decision making leading to better service delivery and higher satisfaction amongst the benefactors.

In modern days, activities at the end of government exploded and governments started becoming responsible for everything; from Economic Development to Law and Order, from Health and Education to Infrastructure, from Individual care to Social welfare, from regulation to welfare etc. This increase called for more and more number of specialized functions and departments. Though it was seemingly the only possible solution at that point of time for service delivery, things have changed a lot today. This change has been brought by the technical advancements and possibilities of using ICT for Governance.

3. What is happening today?

Modern day governments have realized the pressures from every direction to improve service delivery to citizens, become more transparent, reduce discretionary decision making and introduce simpler methods and procedures in order to address the expectations that citizens have. Under this kind of tremendous pressure, it has been realized that introduction of e-governance is not optional; it is a must and is indispensable. And here lies the catch. Though every one agrees that e-governance should be adopted at a massive scale, but what are the logical steps to do it, what should be the scope of activities, what would be the shape and size of governance once 'e' is introduced etc, are unanswered questions.

Thus, in the absence of this clarity various government agencies are trying to translate their processes into applications and introducing computers for efficiency. Though it can not be under estimated that this has brought lot of improvements but this is just a miniscule part of improvement as compared to what is desired. It has added more clutter, in lack of a viable coordinated well planned Macro approach. These efforts are creating silos of systems and integration if planned at all would itself be humongous task. This approach is also leading to higher dissatisfaction since citizen needs to run from one so called computerized department to the other to avail of the services. Is it this what we want?

4. What needs to be done?

It is a well known fact that for highest efficiency of system, there should be minimum steps, least of hurdles, converged view points and single window, but contrary to this, for larger satisfaction, all these should be as consultative and inclusive as possible, there should be maximum decentralization, high flexibility and highest amount of people's participation. This is the real catch twenty two situation. What

should be the approach toward e-governance? How should scope of e-initiatives of various departments be defined? How should they be linked? Who will own common and overlapping set of responsibilities? And last but not the least- Can it be done?

Answer to this lies in the fact that we need to recognize that the very concept of governance as envisaged in the earliest of its time was organic. This philosophy holds true even today. Developments which took place in between and led to decentralization of governance for the sake of better governance, have overgrown its utility and has actually started degrading the whole performance of the government. At this juncture, ICT provides us the opportunity in terms of providing possibility of going back to the organic nature of governance and providing an actual seamless and single view of government to citizens.

This can be done, once we realize this fact, and start looking at various departments/ministries/agencies/ functionaries of government as different channels for delivery of the same thing; i.e. **services to citizens**. Keeping this consideration in mind, we need to look at process and procedures which are adopted by these channels, redesign and modify all these processes for convergence but yes with one basic difference. Here the point of convergence has to be the citizen. Citizen has to be the focal point around which we need to reengineer government processes, making governance truly simple, accessible and representative. The demand for putting the citizen at the centre is not only fulfilled when all government services are online. To reach the citizen-centric approach government should focus on three things. First, it needs to develop the capacity to act as a single enterprise so that citizens feel they are being served by one organization rather than a number of different public authorities; secondly, government must organize themselves around citizens' demands and expectations; and finally, it needs to develop structures for being more agile and flexible than it is at present.

Regarding the second question, that is how the scope of e-initiatives of various departments should be defined, it is pertinent to carry out a detailed analysis of 'Government – Governed' relationship. This analysis will throw out different result for different circumstances depending upon geography, culture, people's aspirations, socio-economic status of country at large etc and would provide the foundation for framing up National e-Governance Programs. Though constraints like funds, available capacity of both private sector and public sector etc would guide this framing up exercise to some extent; it would be worth fixing scope and objectives primarily in tune with the result of the analysis.

The next important aspect of linking various government ministries, departments (both federal and state), functionaries etc should also be looked at as an issue of governance rather than just technology, though technology would be a very important enabler. The first exercise here should be to focus on various processes involved in delivery of services to citizens. Attempt should be made to streamline processes, both intradepartmental and interdepartmental, in an organic fashion, focusing on desired efficiencies in service delivery. Acts, Rules and Regulation should be amended accordingly. Here primary guiding principle should be to present government to citizen as a single enterprise, and citizen should not be bogged down issues relating to interoperability and inconsistencies between various networks. We are fortunate today, that technology makes it possible by adopting Internet as a medium. When used suitably we can use it to connect any two applications by exploiting technologies like web services, XML, Gateways etc. Standardization also plays very vital role in this attempt of interconnecting various elements of government.

As far as issue of owning up of common and overlapping set of responsibilities is concerned, it can be achieved by restructuring governments with a view to make it amenable to handle new set of responsibilities. There are examples abound across the world, where governments have transformed themselves by doing so. We must remember that same tree can not be made to bear different fruits. This has to be a conscious call of governments making an attempt to serve new age citizens.

5. Concluding Remarks

Can it be done? Yes it can very well be done. Various Governments have already done this and are in the process of constant improvisation. The learning is, that we should have clarity of purpose, and make an attempt to fulfill it in phased manner. There may not be a fool proof diagnostic, which can answer all the questions in one go, but yes gradually it can be done.

We should try and make a business case and clear goal set, which we want to achieve through e-governance, start step by step, and keep evaluating and re-evaluating while the work is in progress and make necessary changes whenever a deviation is sensed.

Then only we will be able to provide the same old seamless view of government to citizens, make them more satisfied and bring in lot of synergy and optimization in the way governments work today. This will lead to virtual integration of government and make it an organic whole again, which is centered at facilitating the governed.

About the Author

Vishal Singh is a Civil Servant from Uttar Pradesh, presently working as Senior Consultant, Program Management, Monitoring and Evaluation Systems, National e-Governance Plan - Program Management Unit, National Institute of Smart Government, Department of Information Technology, Government of India. He is responsible for Program Management and Monitoring of 27 National Mission Mode Projects of e-Governance being implemented across the country by Central and State Governments. He is responsible for assisting DIT in providing feedback to various high level committees like: A Body chaired by Hon'ble Prime Minister, National Advisory Group chaired by Hon'ble Minister, C&IT, Apex Committee chaired by Cabinet Secretary, Planning Commission, Ministry of Finance etc.