

# Use of ICT in improving governance and social accountability with a pro-poor approach: reflections from India

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**T**he issue of digital divide is often discussed in terms of the outreach of information technology and communication infrastructure that provides electronic connectivity. Although availability of adequate bandwidth and reasonable access to internet are key factors in bridging the digital divide, these alone are not sufficient for providing benefits of e-governance to the common people, particularly the poor in developing countries. The relevance and usefulness of content to meet the local needs of people are very important in making a creative use of technology to bridge the digital divide for achieving the developmental goals. Not only this, a conscious effort to enmesh the basic principles of good governance in information technology related initiatives is also necessary to ensure that the poor and the vulnerable are able to easily access the services that the government provides to them.

This paper gives an illustration of some projects in India that focus on a pro-poor approach in service delivery with simplification of the processes to improve accountability, transparency, responsiveness and efficiency of the government agencies in providing some very basic services to the citizen. Some of the initiatives mentioned here have been taken by the Centre for Good Governance (CGG), Hyderabad, India.

## Improving accountability in the housing programme for the poor

India has an ambitious programme to help poor households in acquiring a low cost house. There are schemes involving large subsidies to construct these houses for the poor. Considering the very large number of beneficiaries in these schemes, there always exist some possibilities of wrong targeting and misuse of subsidy.

A web-enabled system was developed by CGG to give project management and MIS support to the executing body in the government, but to also enable equal access to citizens, beneficiaries and civil society in obtaining information.

This system can be used to get up-to-date information about a beneficiary, stage of construction of a house, details about the money released as subsidy, materials supplied by the executing agency, and relevant photographs that can be easily uploaded. Besides the government officials, this information can also be seen in public domain by the general public, civil society activists, community based organizations and people's representatives. It is therefore possible for them to carry out verification at the field level to cross-check the information.

This e-governance initiative results in a high degree of transparency and accountability of government functionaries towards the poor. This checks misappropriation of subsidies and also improves the management of programme in general. Presently this system is supporting a database of more than 6.5 million houses under construction in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India.

Image: source



Initiatives by the Centre for Good Governance are focussed on improving communications technology for the poor

### Online Grievance Redressal Tracking System

The screenshot shows the 'Complaint Details' section of the Online Grievance Redressal Tracking System. The interface includes a header with the system name and a navigation menu (Home, Services, Downloads, Logout). The main content area displays the following details:

Docket Number :	110174
Date of complaint :	2005-07-04 12:15:23
Complainer Name :	N.V. Rajag
Phone :	9885343059
Address :	Aparna Apartments
Department :	Engineering
District :	Ranga Reddy
Municipality :	SERILINGAMPALLY (Urban)
Colony :	Sri Krishna Deva Raya nagar
Query :	Prohibit with non lining of roads
Action :	road repaired
Status :	solved
Solved By :	sl_engg_aa1 Last Updated On: 2005-03-23 16:34:04

This type of system is being used in certain towns particularly in the state of Andhra Pradesh with a good degree of success

Source:

### Web-based system charting the construction of a house

The screenshot displays a web-based system for charting house construction. It is divided into two main sections: 'LOCATION DETAILS' and 'PERSONAL DETAILS'. The 'LOCATION DETAILS' section includes fields for District Name, Mandal Name, Habitation Name, Ward Name, Gram Panchayat Name, and Ward Name, all of which are populated with 'AMARAVATHI'. Other fields include House No (5-104), Locality (CHERUKURU MARY RANI), and Beneficiary Name (SIL). The 'PERSONAL DETAILS' section includes fields for Gender (Female), Religion (Hindu), Caste (SC), Sub-Caste (Not Applicable), Age (26), Family Annual Income (9500), Occupation of Husband (Agricultural Labourer), Occupation of Wife (Agricultural Labourer), Whether Beneficiary is Physically Handicapped (No), No. of Family Members (4), Ration Card No. (VNP27090700467), and Membership of SHG (Yes). A photograph of a house under construction is also visible.

The impact of this e-governance initiative is that there is a very high degree of transparency and accountability of government functionaries towards the poor for whom the subsidy is given

Source:

### Improving social accountability in welfare programmes for students

Central and state governments in India support poor students by providing scholarships and fee reimbursement. Generally, these processes have been associated with complaints about processing delays. CGG has created a system known as E-pass, where students can register online and the money is sent direct to their bank accounts after verification and processing. Presently 2.5 million students are making use of this facility in the state of Andhra Pradesh and it has substantially reduced processing time and eliminated scope for irregularities. Another aspect of reinforcing this e-governance initiative with tools for community empowerment is by introducing a social audit of the implementation of such schemes. Students and parents are involved in scrutinizing records to verify recipients' genuineness and pinpoint delays.

### Transparency and social audit

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is a flagship programme to provide support to the rural poor, who are usually unemployed outside the agricultural season. This programme provides 100 days of assured employment every year to the wage seeker in community-oriented works. A comprehensive system is in place on a national website to show the details of the beneficiaries, the money released, community works on which the workers have been deployed, and time taken in making payments etc. This has brought enormous transparency to help millions of people in India, who have registered for work under this scheme. This is also supported by concurrent social audit, which in turn improves the quality and reliability of services offered. This also eliminates the role of middleman as technology has a direct interface with the people. In a large number of cases the payments are also made through mobile technology and hand held devices.

### Community score cards and social accountability

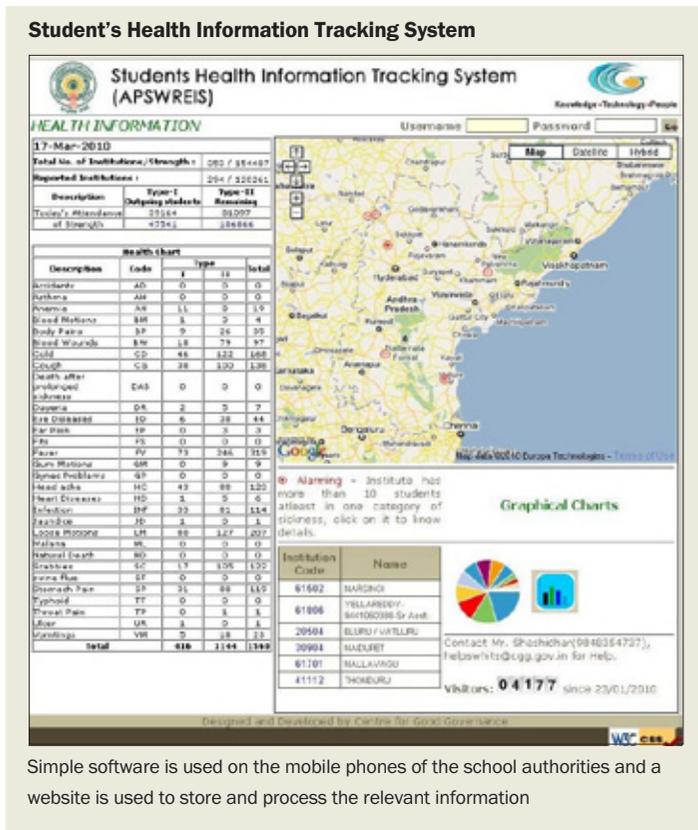
With the help of the World Bank Institute, CGG has developed the Community Score Card as a tool for social accountability. This was piloted in a few districts in Andhra Pradesh. The community gives an assessment on a quantified scale to record its experience of the functioning of a public utility such as a hospital or school. These scores given by the community can also be compared and correlated with the official parameters posted on a website giving statistics about the utility.

### Grievance redressal, Right to Information and ICT

An important aspect of the interface of the common citizen with government is the system for redressing grievances. An easy access with a reliable means of response to the citizen in case of a grievance can significantly improve government to citizen relations. Most of the government offices in India have to deal with a large number of petitions, complaints and applications and it becomes difficult to track and monitor the grievances, resulting in delays and dissatisfaction.

An Online Grievance Redressal Tracking System has been developed by CGG to provide a comprehensive solution. This offers a multiple choice to the citizens in selecting a mode of communication with a public office. A citizen can choose to register a complaint by making a call to the call centre or send a fax or SMS or a written complaint which can be systematically classified, tracked and acted upon by various layers of bureaucracy. The system provides for automatic mobile phone alerts to the senior officers in case their subordinate staff fails to solve the problem. Such a system is being used in certain towns particularly in Andhra Pradesh with a good degree of success.

There has been a paradigm shift in public administration in India with the introduction of the Right to Information Act 2005. This has completely changed the notion of record management from that of privacy to transparency. This path-breaking piece of legislation has enabled millions of people to hold civil servants accountable. Although the



Simple software is used on the mobile phones of the school authorities and a website is used to store and process the relevant information

Source:

e-government solutions to manage the Right to Information Act are still in a stage of development and need further stabilization, the setting up of call centres in the state of Bihar is noteworthy. A citizen can simply mention over the phone the information that s/he needs. This request for information is sorted and sent to the concerned department which follows a time bound schedule to provide the information. In certain other states basic management information systems are being developed to help the regulatory authorities in tracking the progress of pending applications to seek information. Mobile technology is also being used, and a person can track the progress of his case by sending an SMS and obtain the information about the status of his request in a system developed by CGG for the state of Andhra Pradesh.

### Mobile phones for improving service delivery

Use of mobile phones has improved the ease of using technology to improve the citizen-government interface even in the remote areas where large numbers of poor people live. Mobile connectivity is increasingly helping the people in accessing government services. Emergency response system to provide rescue and relief are usually based on mobile technologies with a centralized control system. Many states in India have started emergency services such as ambulances using the latest GIS-based technologies to provide immediate help to poor people in case of emergency. The Emergency Management Research Institute of Hyderabad is one such example. Similarly, telemedicine is also being introduced using ICT.

### Monitoring health status of poor children in remote schools

An interesting pilot scheme has been started by CGG in the residential schools for poor children from disadvantaged sections of the society



A call centre for Grievance Redressal in a municipality

to monitor their health status. The schools which are located in far flung areas send daily status report to a centralized office giving the status of the general health of children including cases requiring immediate medical treatment. A simple application using templates to furnish these basic details is used on the mobile phones of the school authorities and a website is used to store and process the relevant information.

### Common Service Centres

The provision of common citizen service centres is an important component of the national e-government plan. These centres provide convergence through a single window and enable citizens to approach government for a multiple array of services. These centres tend to remove the human interface at the cutting edge thereby reducing the scope for delays and malpractices.

These centres have started coming up even in rural areas and the poor can easily access government services through them on payment of nominal fees instead of travelling to distant government offices.

There is a great scope for innovation in using ICT in a way that improves transparency and accountability of government to the people. The initial results are encouraging and hold a lot of promise for transforming the way in which governments would deal with the citizens by using ICT in an inclusive manner to help the poor and the vulnerable.