

SUMMARY NOTE

The Future of Governance Forum 7 Oct - 8 Oct

PANEL ON BUILDING KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ATTITUDES FOR EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT



Panelists

Anuradha Joshi, Social Scientist
Chakshu Roy, PRS Legislative Research
Srikanth Viswanathan, Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy

Moderator

Rajika Seth, Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research

About the Panel



There are three critical, interrelated pieces of information on government functioning that all development professionals should know about- information on the flow of funds in government programmes; information on administrative structure across levels of government; and an understanding of the local self-government itself, which is usually the first point of contact for most citizens.

This panel addressed specific capacity gaps in engaging with the government with respect to the above-mentioned points. It also explored the different stakeholders in the development ecosystem, their specific challenges and capacity requirements.

The Future of Governance forum was curated by the Accountability Initiative at the Centre for Policy Research, and co-hosted with Arthan from 7 October- 8 October 2020.

The second panel followed the inaugural panel in which the importance of civil societies and citizen-state partnership was emphasised. This panel deliberated on the importance of “real-world, actionable knowledge” that citizens can utilise for effective engagement with the state.

Mr. Roy spoke about the gaps in the citizen-state relationship that impedes co-ownership by both stakeholders, as equal partners on collaborative projects and interventions. He made four broad observations.

- Firstly, he spoke of perceived limits of citizen-state engagement. He said that the voting electorate often confuse civic duty with only the physical act of voting. **However, in a democracy, sustained and nuanced engagement is required for the relationship to develop and partnerships to be built between the elected institutions and the people.**
- Secondly, he spoke about how successful civic movements are often driven by individuals. This risks progress coming to a standstill once the concerned individuals move out of their role as the the force behind a project or a collaborative dialogue. **Care should be taken to institutionalise such projects, movements and engagement platforms, so that the work is sustained across individuals and elected politicians over time.**
- Thirdly, he spoke about **the importance of developing and inculcating a culture of active civic partnerships among children and students, and encouraging their participation.** Parents and teachers have to play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions of young people on the significance of continuous

engagement. This can be done by actively taking children to townhall gatherings and local government meetings, as well as ensuring that their school curriculum includes modules on the importance of civic engagement and responsibilities. He mentioned that educational institutes must take care to not teach these subjects superficially but design interactive sessions that help students understand the impact of these relationships with public officials and local forms of government.

- Lastly, he spoke about the **detriment of consistently depicting the Civil Society Organisation (CSO)-state relationship as only adversarial and tense**. He said that a successful relationship must be that of equal partnership and ownership, and the possibility of building one is not impossible. In this context, he mentioned the importance of the Constitution as a guiding document that underlines the roles and responsibilities of local governments and the importance of decentralisation that is a fundamental element of diverse democracies.

Professor Joshi agreed with Mr. Roy and spoke about how much of civil society engagement is largely individual-driven rather than backed by institutions. Drawing upon her work, she spoke about the myriad pressures on public officials that influence their motivations and incentives.

There are four types of pressures:

- External political pressures either through supervision or monitoring;
- Pressure from the business community that they have to pacify to get investments and projects;
- Peer pressure from their contemporaries in performance comparatives as well as,
- Pressure from citizens to undertake public responsibility.

These forces often pull civil society actors and their public officials in opposing directions. Added to this, they have their own political ambitions and career goals that they follow. **Thus, in order to engage effectively, it is equally important to**

understand their incentives and motivations. They, in turn, depend a lot on the prestige and credibility of civic organisations and individuals that they can trust when working toward a partnership with them. This is where knowledge of bureaucracies and government processes become crucial for CSOs, and citizens in general, in order to be able to establish a functional, professional bond with them.

She added from her work studying the engagement of indigenous communities in Guatemala and local officials. She spoke about the importance of learning to “knock on the right door,” and mentioned that going to the right official at different levels of governance for the right reasons is important. Otherwise, if one approaches officials for engagement and permissions that is not directly within their purview, the risks of wasting resources and undermining one’s own credibility is high. Therefore, understanding the roles and responsibilities of officials is essential for effective partnerships to flourish.

The conversation then turned to the value of maintaining one’s autonomy while collaborating with the government and the delicate balance that is required in working in partnership without one’s own agenda being undermined and co-opted by the other. Mr. Viswanathan stressed on how this balance is critical. He spoke about three phases of a typical state-CSO partnership.

- The first phase involves being invited to the table for discussion. This is where building one’s credibility through good work is important. In this day and age in which citizens’ voices are becoming louder and they have enabling platforms to express their dissatisfaction, the space is also competitive for citizen driven credible partnerships. **The state would want to engage with organisations and individuals that have a history of doing credible work.**
- The second phase is to work as legitimate partners. This is where maintaining autonomy is paramount, and one has to demonstrate

subject expertise to gain ground but at the same time, have the determination to stand your ground. If state functionaries understand that the civic partnerships offer cutting-edge solutions to real world problems, then the possibility of engagement is stronger. It is, at the same time, important for the CSO to ensure there is “creative tension”, and that the partnership risks termination if certain things are taken away from the discussion table.

- Finally, it is important to **cement the partnership with an actual intention to “walk with the state” rather than just providing suggestions and inputs.** Partnerships are strengthened when the state understands that the CSO or individual is equally willing to take responsibility and be held accountable for the output.

In the next segment, the speakers gave some examples of successful partnerships and skills that made these work.

Professor Joshi elaborated on some real world examples of successful CSO-state partnerships. She mentioned that, in the Philippines, a CSO called Government Watch (or G-Watch) had collaborated with the government to provide textbooks to frontline schools. She mentioned that this collaboration was remarkable not only because the CSO-state level coordination was successful, but also that G-Watch was able to coordinate, reach out and successfully work with other CSOs at different levels. They set up an efficient service delivery system with coalitions that worked seamlessly across levels.

Mr. Roy spoke about his experience guiding young students working with Parliamentarians. He agreed that, generally, there is a lack of understanding about the system on the part of individuals operating outside.

He also mentioned that there is always a cost involved in building any successful relationship. Governments work with tight budgets, and accommodating ideas require a considerable change of plans. Therefore, CSOs should understand

the budget-making process as well, in order to catalyse further conversations and partnerships.

Mr. Viswanathan also spoke of his experience working with young people on modules for student curriculum around civic participation. He stressed on the fact that one must not forget the bigger picture. The immediate and persistent problems facing the world today are issues such as women’s workforce participation, gender pay gap, climate change. These cannot be solved by the top brass alone. It requires grassroots engagement and participatory decision-making and planning. This is where it becomes crucial, in the current context, to build effective relationships with individuals and the civil society and people within the system.

Policymaking often overlooks the fundamental understanding of context, and focusses only on content and evidence building. However, **local problems need an understanding of local contextual issues before policies can be devised.** This requires local participation. It is also important for CSOs to fully understand their own demands and approach the government accordingly. It is valuable to ask questions such as: are they an initiative looking to “fix the problem in order to change the system” or are they looking to “fix the system in order to fix the problem”. That distinction is important for CSOs in order to not get co-opted or sidelined by the state.

For him, the three key areas that require minute attention by CSOs in order to collaborate with authorities are:

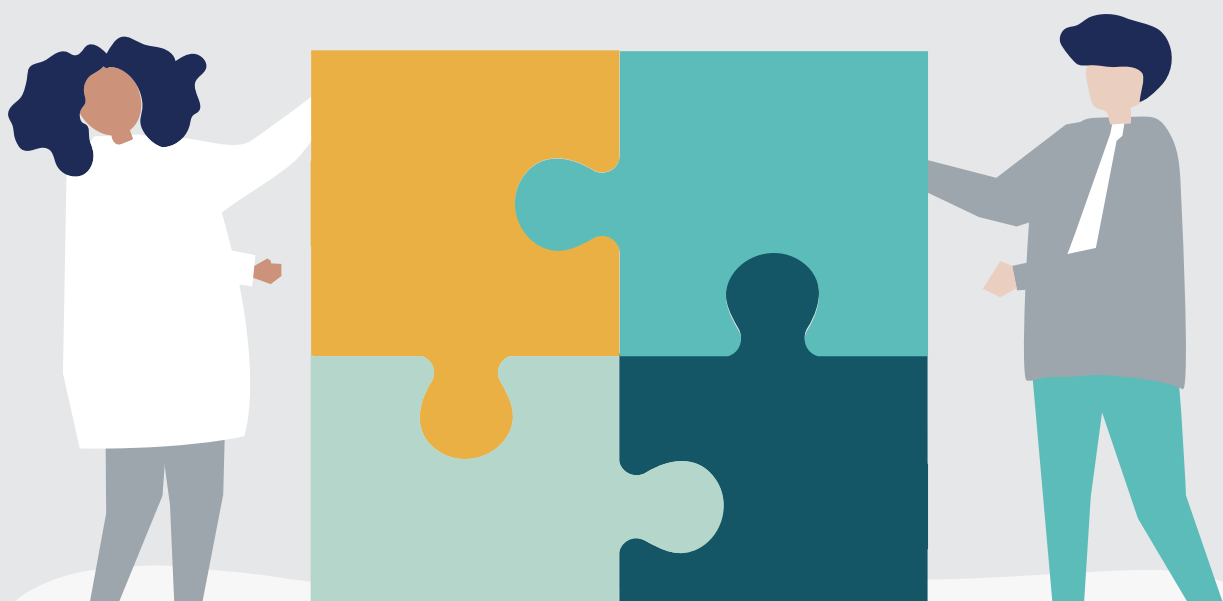
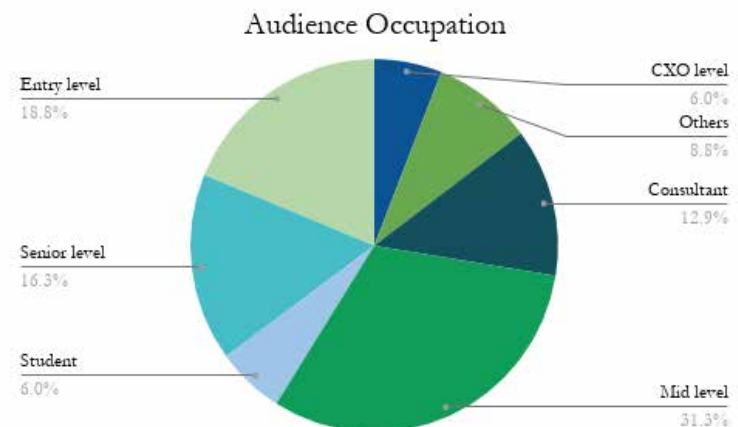
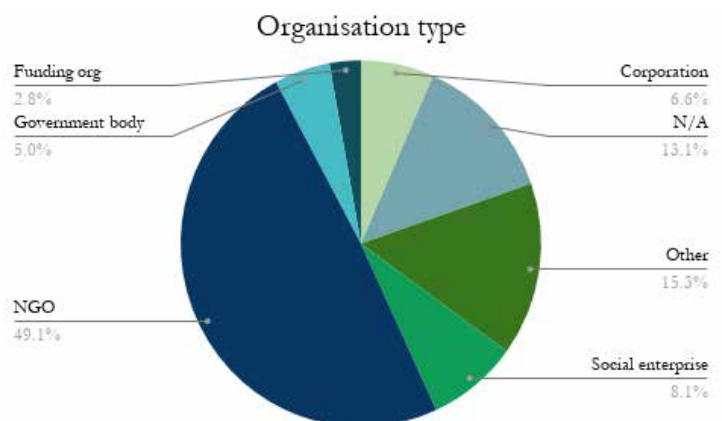
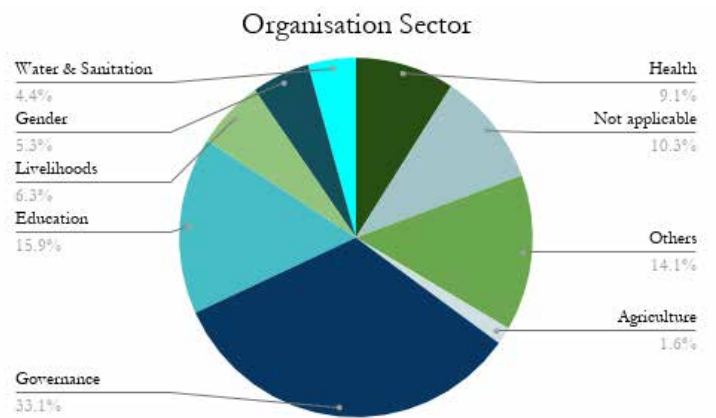
- First, to recognise governments and public officials as individuals with their own motivations;
- Second, to view collaborations as relationships, incorporate the need to communicate, and understand contexts for the issues they are addressing, as important aspects for collaboration;
- Finally, to understand the power arrangements and assess the room available to them in order to influence and affect decision-making.

The conversation then moved towards the importance of walking a tightrope between the CSO and public officials. **How does one remain flexible and amenable to ideas and suggestions and yet maintain one's autonomy, agenda and demands?** Professor Joshi explained how this required skilled negotiations. From the Guatemala example she had used before, she said that the concerned CSO demonstrated their unwillingness to undermine their own demand but at the same time were willing to collaborate and co-partner in the project. This helped them maintain their credibility and at the same time their capacity to influence decisions for indigenous communities.

Mr. Roy also spoke about the importance of following through on any proposed changes. Legislation is a complicated process that requires constant engagement to ensure that the laws or amendments being instated are implemented fairly and impartially. **Therefore, a commitment to engage in the long run through the process is also vital.**

The conversation concluded by highlighting the importance of holding governments accountable to the fiscal commitments they have made for the year. Monitoring of finances can help assess government performance not only at the national level but also at state and local levels. Financial allocations at the national level and fund flows are one of the most important ways to ensure government priorities and commitments.

Who the audience were:





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