

SUMMARY NOTE

The Future of Governance Forum 7 Oct - 8 Oct

**PANEL ON THE IMPORTANCE OF
UNDERSTANDING THE NUTS AND BOLTS
OF GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONING**



Panelists

Luis Miranda, Indian School of Public Policy
Nikhil Dey, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan
Poornima Dore, Tata Trusts

Moderator

Avani Kapur, Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research

About the Panel



The panelists touched on several themes, including:

- *How we can conceptualise democracy where the most marginalised have an equal voice.*
- *The importance of citizen access to information so as to enable participation of the commonest of common people in all arms of governance, and provide citizens access to the 'nuts and bolts' of government functioning.*
- *The constructive role of technology.*

The session brought together professionals on their experience of engaging with different stakeholders, including marginalised communities.

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.

Ms. Kapur, the moderator of the session, began the deliberation by saying that the idea of government engagement is not always clear. It is often expressed in terms of the idea of citizens' rights, and the critical role that the civil society can play in shaping ideas, and helping states achieve goals. The state, however, is not one single unified body and nor is the civil society. A challenge thus is that civil society doesn't have a full understanding of government systems and processes.

Thinking through citizen engagement

Governance is something one needs to engage with to know what kind of relationship one will have with the state, Mr. Dey said. Reflecting on his experience with MKSS, he noted that actors within the civil society play different roles, and even in MKSS, the organisation wanted to work with various people- peasants, dalits, women. The idea of democracy is also social democracy, he said, as Babasaheb Ambedkar articulated it. When one deals with majoritarian views, whether at the national level or Gram Sabha levels, it is crucial to look at the marginalised. The challenge of governance is that they can have equal voice, are not looked upon as poor, but as bearers of rights. Therefore, in MKSS' framework, the emphasis is on a combination of democratic rights for the most marginalised and economic rights enshrined in the Directive Principles of State Policies of the Constitution, something often forgotten in our model of economic growth.

Next, Mr. Miranda responded that the government has a capacity challenge, and this is particularly evident in the pandemic. The government has realised that it can't handle the crisis and relief on its own, so they ask the for-profit and non-profit sectors to assist. He further said that the tragedy of public policy in India is that the government cannot penalise bad actors as it is a challenging task. **But the fundamental problem is the inability to distinguish between**

a bonafide mistake and a malafide mistake, and every mistake is treated as malafide. There is lack of trust. More trust (and more collaboration) is only possible if people work together (if all three sectors *Samaj*, *Sarkaar* and *Bazaar* work together).

In India, problems are so large, that this leads to other people getting involved, for instance public-private partnerships. A lot of time is spent on managing these relationships between the private and public stakeholders. Important in these relationships is building trust through communication. People need to design things properly as quite often, a lot of partnerships collapse due to poor design and weak incentives.

Mr. Miranda added that there is a need to step up the bar on transparency. And finally, one can't ignore the fact that there is a need for local solutions to solve global problems and the process has to be collaborative. If people at the top believe that they have all the answers, then there is a problem.

Ms. Dore added that people think of governance as a right-based campaign and something that is for activists to take care of. But governance is about decision-making and the quality of decision-making. In that context, governance becomes important to every institution.

Responding to Ms. Kapur's question on the civil society and their engagement with the government, Ms. Dore segmented actors as follows:

- One segment looks at implementation (last-mile access) and clubs it with information gaps. In the last few years, people have often come together to try to solve problems of access and information. A large section of grassroots and civil society actors fit here.
- Community-based organisations, like farmer groups, are the second category, she said. Broadly, these are owned/run by communities.
- Third are community-owned groups, which are not defined as the civil society, like Gram

Sabha or citizen participation forums where decisions are made or influenced.

- Then are individuals. We look at actors that are more formally organised i.e. CSOs, but individuals/citizens also play a part.
- Finally, think tanks and the academia review and evaluate, work on information, knowledge systems, capacity building, etc.

According to Ms. Dore, stakeholders who are not defined as civil society, can also fall into the private sector category. They often come up with ideas, and can be the technological players devising digital solutions. She further emphasised that technology is important to address when one talks about governance, and what government capacities look like.

Mr. Dey then responded to a question on the need to strengthen civic engagement in an urban context (given the role that periodic public hearings between Panchayati Raj Institutions and administration play). He said that **there was no question that an equivalent of the Gram Sabha in rural areas is needed in urban spaces as well.** It has been tried for some time now and is moving in that direction in the form of *Mohalla* Sabhas. The Panchayati Raj system is far more developed than local self-governance in urban areas, in which the system functions like an implementing agency would presently.

Ms. Dore said that if gram sabhas are active, CSOs ask the local community to use the sabhas as a platform to discuss what the village thinks is important. In the urban context, there is immense scope to do such work. If one looks at the rural context, there is the Ministry of Panchayati Raj which has a central focus and pushes for action. Similarly, thinking about the urban context is needed as well.

Mr. Miranda added by way of example from Mumbai, and said that advanced locality management groups are very effective in bringing civil society, activists, prominent citizens together in their locality. They talk to the government about local issues. In an urban context, it is

possible to have spaces like these as they already exist, and we just need more of them.

The conversation then turned to participatory democracy, as part of which Mr. Miranda said that **if one believes that people sitting at the top have all the answers, then there is a genuine problem**. How can you get the information about what is happening at the ground-level which can impact decision-making at the top? If data are not available, one cannot take proper decision. There is a need to have more participation from below. Another issue is accountability as many people criticise but do not want to take responsibility for their actions. However, if there is too much participation, there is less accountability and a slowing of processes.

Accountability and citizen engagement

Responding to Ms. Kapur's question on efforts such as the Jan Soochna portal in Rajasthan to advance transparency and accountability since government departments have to put up information, Mr. Dey said that the general principles of transparency and accountability are fundamental.

In the journey between laws and implementation, it is important to see how they are implemented, and sitting down with government officials and institutions to try and see how things can be implemented. Sharing his experience of the problems he has had on governance he said that technology can be exclusionary. From this perspective, digital dialogues have become crucial. Even though, after fighting for years and filing RTIs, access to documents has become digitised, this digital access is hidden behind the admin login. So, there is a need for a *janta* information system for people to get the information they want, much like the Jan Soochna portal.

On information and digital technologies, Ms. Dore added, there is a misconception that digital needs to be a platform or a dashboard, and information needs to be consumed in this way. Giving an example, she said that the village

development planning process has a mix of participatory rural appraisals (PRA) and household surveys, which capture the village needs, and is fed into the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). We may have the technology for the District Magistrate and the associated team to process it digitally (such as the dropdown option in a form on a platform) but the Gram Sabha can make decisions using the information. Converting the GPDP plan into wall paintings will be useful. The quality of the conversations is very different in Panchayats. These are more focussed, and do not need a digital dashboard. From this perspective, the scope of digital mediums extends to offline communication mediums.

She emphasised that, within the civil society also, there is a need to create a culture of engaging with information more, and looking at technology as a constructive process.

Some other aspects to consider

Lastly, on the topic of information asymmetry or how some people have more access to knowledge/data and critical information than others, the speakers mentioned the following.

For Mr. Miranda, keeping the conversation going is important and a tactic can be to persist, not give up. He reiterated Ms. Dore when she said that digital does not have to only be technology. He asked again: during the pandemic, how can issues from the villages be escalated? According to him, a challenge is when people feel they are not being heard.

On how the pandemic has changed traditional systems of governance, Mr. Dey said that a big challenge has been on how much people can meet face-to-face. Also, governments are struggling for resources. But principles of transparency and accountability and democratic governance should hold us in good stead.

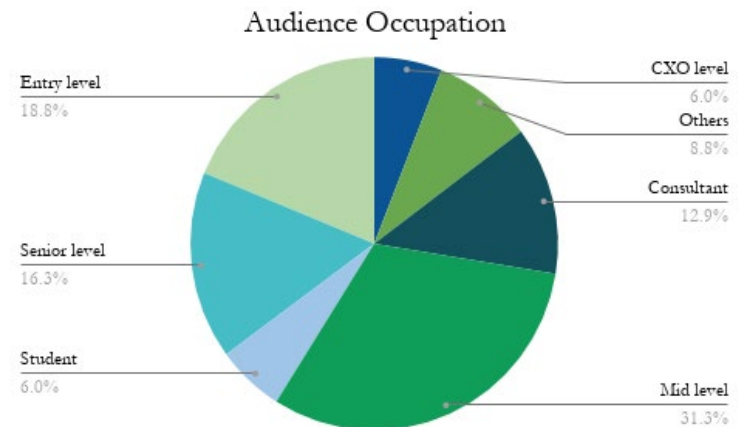
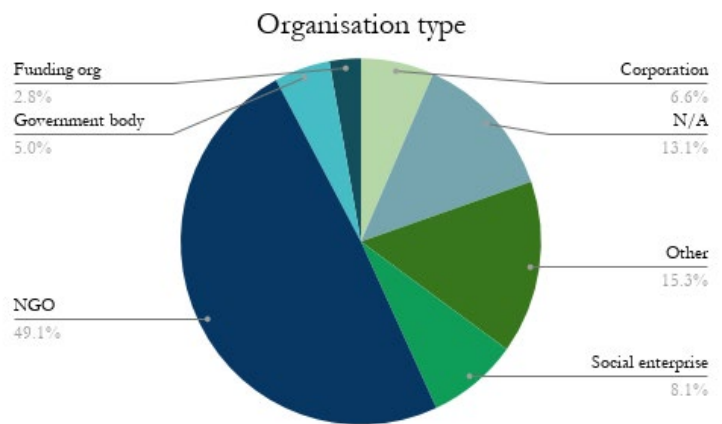
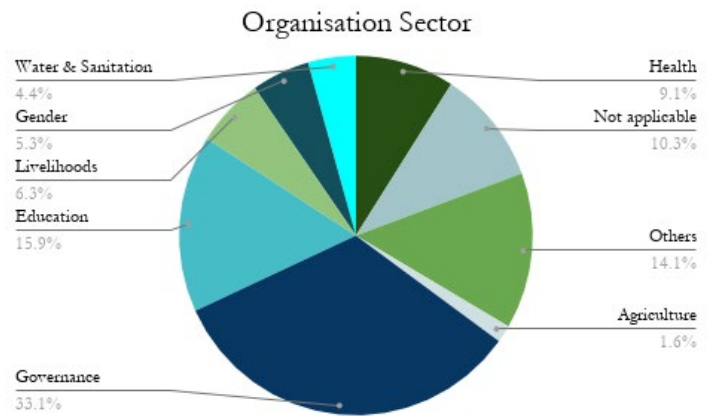
Ms. Dore said that the pandemic has sharpened focus on the need to identify where the vulnerable are, and what needs to be done for them. On

sustainability, she said that it is the consistency of the effort to push for reforms, and finding ways to embed these into the government.

For Mr. Miranda, there are three aspects to consider on sustainability: designing, starting, and agility. **One needs to design policy properly, get it started without waiting for the perfect solution to emerge, and keep tweaking so that it works out.**

This is a summary of the panel discussion, and has been paraphrased.

Who the audience were:





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