Articles & Commentaries

p-Guru

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Reforming public services: Lessons from India

Reinventing public administration

Rising aspirations of people in general due to enhanced exposure to media depicting a good quality of life and fulfilled lifestyles mean that there are demands for bureaucracies to provide better public services and show greater respect for citizens. The current reality, however, is that most government departments in the developing world are not even aware of exactly who their customers are. In the perceptions of citizens, government agencies/departments are slow, inefficient, and impersonal. With an emancipated citizenry and active civil society organizations, federal, state, and local governance and public service administration have become very complex, with diverse demands from different stakeholders both internal and external. Governments are being forced to take on new roles through public-private partnerships with the involvement and participation of civil society.

Over the years, the Weberial form of governance has become distorted, resulting in inefficiency, delays, lack of citizen focus, and rent-seeking public servants further compounded by decreasing social sensitivity in many developing countries. Currently, the new public management movement advocates the application of corporate management (governance) principles to administration. The consensus is that a reengineering of administration is required, rather than completely banishing the Weberial model that has its distinct advantages. In this regard, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler in their seminal book *Reinventing the Government* set out 10 "commandments" for government functions with a citizen orientation and business outlook.

> **"With an emancipated citizenry and active civil society organizations, federal, state, and local governance and public service administration have become very complex...."**

Strides in Indian public service

The Indian governance system is rooted in both the UK's Westminster-style democracy and the former USSR's central planning system. Service delivery

outcomes in India remain poor on the whole in spite of major initiatives for administrative reform. A national survey of major public services, covering elementary schools, public hospitals, public transport, drinking water facilities, and public food distribution, by the Public Affairs Center concluded that India has done well in terms of providing basic access to such services, but far less well in terms of ensuring their quality, reliability, and effectiveness. A 2005 study by Transparency International found a high perception of corruption in services as diverse as healthcare, education, power supply, land administration, and the police. Even progress toward the Millennium Development Goals has been rather slow, despite a recent plethora of government initiatives to make administration more responsive, including a Citizens' Charter, granting rights to information, the empowerment of Lok Adalats (public courts), and the introduction of e-governance. However, there have been marked changes, for example, in telephone services, banking, and municipal services such as housing tax administration, water supply, etc. in recent years. Things are improving as a citizen-friendly orientation is developing. Both central and state agencies are striving to put in place a service culture, overcoming both systemic and human barriers to do so, although much more needs to be done.

In this context, the World Bank survey report "Reforming Public Services in India: Drawing Lessons from Success" covering different public services, which cited 25 examples of full success and six of partial success, was an eye-opener to many. The basic triggers for reform were derived from six strategies related to Osborne and Gaebler's 10 commandments: 1) promoting competition (threat of survival); 2) simplifying transactions (integrating e-governance and enhancing transparency); 3) restructuring agency processes (enhancing managerial effectivenesss and civil society involvement); 4) decentralization (power to the people, e.g., Panchayati Raj [village-level self-governance] institutions); 5) building political support for program delivery; and 6) strengthening accountability mechanisms (minimum tenure of officials, right to information, etc.).

The survey concluded that for any reform process to be successful, an enabling environment is the most critical. The main factor with a pervasive effect on all others is the commitment of the political leadership and a champion for the cause. For example, without the commitment and single-handed ruling and facilitation by the chief ministers of three states, some important reforms would not have seen the light of the day: e-Seva Kendras (public service centers) in Andhra Pradesh; decentralization of management of primary education to Panchyati Raj institutions and Parent-Teacher Associations in Madhya Pradesh; and improving the service levels in the city of Bangalore in partnership with local civil society groups. It is worth remembering the example of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore. He relentlessly spearheaded reform movements in socioeconomic and sociocultural fields with the single objective of making the life of the citizens easier and better, primarily focusing on productivity, quality, and service delivery by involving the public. Other important facets of an enabling environment are freedom from needless bureaucracy, with empowerment and easy access to the highest decisionmaking levels, a stable political leadership, and promoting meritocracy.

Reform tactics and sustainability

Once in motion, a reform process must be sustained. It should be remembered that reforms popular with citizens can withstand political transitions. In addition, when reforms are based on a sound business model, they are bound to be more

successful. For example, reform of the Indian telecommunications sector was effectively institutionalized by establishing a legally independent telecom regulatory authority to create a level playing field for both private-and public-sector service providers. Publicprivate partnership models of investment and revenue sharing are found to work better in infrastruc-ture-based services like power and water supply, as evident in cities like Delhi and Bangalore.

The World Bank survey also showed that the big-bang approach to reform does not appear to work, nor do ad-hoc reforms. These must be carefully sequenced; if incremental, the approach is likely to work best. For example, e-governance initiatives should primarily focus on improving convenience and service and cutting drudgery, not reducing corruption. Staff should be told upfront that no jobs will be lost; rather quality of work life will improve. It has taken about three to five years to spread e-Seva Kendras to all districts and suburban towns in Andhra Pradesh, and the Information Technology for Citizens—Best Government Interface program (aptly known as FRIENDS) in Kerala will also take some time to set up sufficient numbers of public IT centers. These processes could be hastened by cooperation from the civil society and focusing on services giving the citizen the most difficulty at a specific point in time.

Yet another innovative instrument that is working wonders in sustaining reforms in India is judicial activism triggered by public-interest litigation by civil society institutions. Three cases concerning controlling pollution levels in Indian cities, solid-waste management in urban municipalities, and transparency in the electoral process were cited as pertinent examples in the World Bank survey report.

The good experience of India and the lessons learned in the process are worth sharing with other developing countries that have comparable socioeconomic and politicoeconomic conditions and development levels, whether they are members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation or in Southeast Asia, Latin America, or Africa.

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