

Information Management in Kutch Earthquake

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INTRODUCTION

The term digital governance refers to governance processes in which information and communication technologies (ICT) play a significant role. Digital governance uses ICT to induce changes in the delivery and standards of governance services and, more importantly, in the way citizens interact and participate in the governance sphere. The role played by ICT could be wide ranging: in delivery and standards of governance services, to how people access such services, and the participation of people in the governance sphere (Digital governance.org Initiative, n.d.).

Digital governance is not just another facet of governance or one more interface between citizens and government. Digital governance is a whole new opportunity, creating immense possibilities between citizens and government by redefining vision and the scope of the entire gamut of relationships (Bedi, Singh, & Srivastava, 2001). Two fundamental anchors of digital governance are local knowledge communities and citizen-centric governance.

BACKGROUND

In 2001, an earthquake measuring 6.9 to 7.9 on the Richter scale struck the district of Kutch in the state of Gujarat, India. The day was January 26, celebrated as Republic Day in India. Damage to life and property was immense. The rescue, relief and rehabilitation work that followed heavily depended on information of various categories and at various levels of functioning. This is the story of transformation of a situation of crisis into a window of opportunity. The article is a development from the oral history recorded from individuals who were associated with the rescue relief and rehabilitation work in Kutch (Mukherjee, 2002). The author was one of the consultants for this project.

ROLE OF INFORMATION

The importance of this information management came through right from the day of the earthquake. Numerous agencies came to work to provide succour; relief material came in truckloads. Coordination was needed urgently.

Many times there would be mismatch of items. For example, a truckload of tea was available but there was no sugar. It was important to put into balance what was required and what was available. The need was felt for a composite demand chart. This was the beginning of collecting and collating information that ultimately resulted in creation of Setus, or bridges; that is, centers that not only catered to the information required for carrying out relief operations, but developed into nodes that would supply data to the government and CSOs about the ground-level requirements and inform the beneficiaries at the personal level of what was available. Later, the Setus coordinated the information required for developmental work so that the devastated region could become productive again.

The idea, according to a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report (2001), was almost classical in its simplicity—a network of village-level centers that provide a trickle-up flow of data, feedback and information to influence policy and programs. A Setu was conceived as a nodal link between all the actors in relief and rehabilitation. Its stakeholders were government agencies and officials at different levels, CSOs, the donor community, the village community and the Setus themselves. Primarily intended to bridge the gap between the efforts and outcomes of the rehabilitation process, the Setus ultimately aimed to make people less vulnerable in a multi-hazard environment by harnessing local resources to optimal levels. To do this, the Setus had a wide-ranging set of activities. They facilitated coordination between government agencies and CSOs on the one hand and the village community on the other, to ensure a proper flow of benefits. They served as platforms for redress of grievances and transparency of procedures. All this was to be made possible through a two-way information flow.

Information for Relief

By January 30, 2001, 33 sub centers, which later were renamed Setus, were established across Kutch for distribution of relief material. The main depot was in Bhuj. The decision was that volunteers would not go around in trucks distributing relief material. Instead, there would be few volunteers in each of the sub centers. These volunteers would set up “relief material distribution commit-

tees,” establish the needs of the local people and then approach the depot with a consolidated list of requirements. This would affect people’s participation as well as prevent wastage, as only the relief material whose need had been established would be distributed. The distribution at the local level would be through a committee. This arrangement went on for about 2 months.

Responses to large disaster events are likely to involve a large number of relief agencies and teams that create severe pressure on requirements for interoperability and cooperation. With numerous agencies wanting to help Kutch, coordination became essential. The CSOs and corporate houses did not know where to work, how to work. Some corporate houses did not know how to deal with local people or community. These agencies sometimes had special focus such as health, housing and so forth. Also, Kutch being a large district, had long distances to cover. Therefore, information and coordination was essential with relief distribution.

Information for Rehabilitation

In the rehabilitation work, Setus influenced the decision of government by producing concrete data. Initially, the government had decided that villages more than 70% damaged would be relocated. Government had announced this policy. However, it was known that Kutch has a drinking water problem. Also, the agricultural land of the villagers would be disturbed, and people may not accept it.

The 33 Setus, within 48 hours, developed a program for facilitating village community, including village *gram panchayats* on relocation, explaining what relocation was, whether it would be acceptable to them, reasons for their opinions. It was a facilitation program for the village to take a decision about acceptance or rejection of relocation. Only 2%-3% of the villages were agreeable to relocation. The remaining wanted *in situ* reconstruction and rehabilitation. This opinion, with enough scientific and technical data, was provided to district government and state government.

This made government change its policy. The decision was made for *in situ* development. The government was also very happy, as this prevented a crisis. This made government decide to make Setus become an official body for reconstruction and rehabilitation of Kutch. A government resolution (GR) to the effect that the Setus are the earthquake rehabilitation support centers was released.

Collaborating with Government Rehabilitation Programs

These support centers also took up the job of damage assessment, damage to shelter, damage to water struc-

tures—dams, wells—damage to hospitals, assessment of injuries of people. The assessments were to help determine the extent of damage and the commensurate assistance to be disbursed by the government.

The first survey in the rehabilitation phase was to determine whether people were getting their installments of assistance from the government. The installments were released when certain phases of construction was completed; for example, the first installment to build up to plinth level, the second installment after seismic safety features were incorporated, and so forth. Overall, the picture was that there was incongruence between government data and information available on the ground. In Bhachau Taluka, one of the worst affected areas, the government said that 70% disbursement had been done, whereas the actual figure of receipt was found to be 30%-40%.

Then it was realized that the government had disbursed the checks, but the problem was with local banks, which were not able to operate properly due to lack of staff and inadequate cash reserves, especially the village branches. Therefore, money transaction had hit a bottleneck.

At the village level, the community was also not very used to banking transactions. Without cash, construction work could not commence or continue. This information was conveyed to the collector, who immediately called all the banks and the chairmen of the banks and sorted out the situation.

Information and Transparency

The Setus collected household data for the 360-370 villages, including the hamlets. This included category of damage; whether repair or reconstruction was required; if construction was necessary, was any CSO involved; if so, name of the CSO; the level of construction; and seismic safety measures.

The other utility of the survey was identifying spurious claims. For example, two brothers applied for assistance for the same house they had been occupying before the earthquake. Setus determined the number of houses that existed before the earthquake and the number of houses for which compensation was being given after the earthquake. After this, a flying visit would be made by a government surveyor.

In the beginning, this caused problems, as the community felt that though the Setus were primarily for the community, they were actually working against the community. This is where the importance of Setus vis a vis government machinery became evident. Since the Setu office bearers worked with the community, they could explain that because of a few people the village was

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