

Chapter 14

Combating Corruption through e-Governance in India

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ABSTRACT

Studies have shown a prevalence of high level of corruption in the Indian Administrative System, which adversely affects the day-to-day lives of common citizens. This chapter examines the role of e-governance in combating corruption in delivering public services. Through a literature review assessing the outcomes of a few e-governance initiatives related to improving service delivery in different parts of India, this chapter argues that even though technology assists in instituting a transparent, accountable, consistent, reliable, and efficient system for delivery services, it cannot overcome corruption by itself. It will require political will, focused administrative strategy, business process reengineering for simplifying and opening up the system, and persistent efforts to ensure that corruption entrepreneurs do not subvert the gains of the technology.

INTRODUCTION

The poor and disadvantaged populations in developing countries are not able to make the best use of the public services effectively on account of lack of access due to social, economic, physical, informational, and other barriers; and inadequate mechanisms to provide their feedback on complaints/ views/ requests to the service providers and policy makers (Shadrach & Ekeanyawu,

2003, p. 2). Quoting a study in Bangalore city, they indicate a prevalence of widespread corruption in delivery of services by public agencies. Srinivas and Nayar (2007, p. 20) cite a survey of the Bolangir district of Orissa, stating that 63% of respondents expressed that government welfare schemes are riddled with corruption. They refer Harish C. Saxena, Member, National Advisory Council, saying that weak governance resulting in poor service delivery, excessive regulation, and wasteful expenditure are factors impinging on social indicators. Based on a detailed field study

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of petty corruption in India, a Centre for Media Studies Report (2006, p. 1) states, “*Despite a reduction in reporting of corruption in 2005, a large cross section of households had to pay bribes to avail public services in 2005. In case of five public services (Police, Land Administration, Judiciary, Electricity, and Government Hospitals) covered in the CMS corruption study, more than 10 million households had paid bribes during the year for availing services.*”

Addressing an official ceremony, Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, pointed out that corruption is a social cancer eating away vitals of institutions of governance and the society and is a threat to national well-being. Reiterating national resolve for providing corruption-free, transparent, accountable, responsible, and responsive governance system, he urged for zero tolerance to corruption and a multi-pronged approach to stem the rot (CBI Bulletin, 2006, p. 11). Following the recommendations in World Bank (1997, pp. 157-158) and World Bank (1998, pp. 85-93), the Bank and other donors insist on good governance practices in the reforms agenda. However, Demmers et al. (2004, p. 10) quote World Development Reports 2000/2001 and 2002 in emphasizing that there is no blueprint for good governance. Considering the discourse on good governance, Dwivedi and Mishra (2007, p. 705) summarize transparency, rule of law, accountability, incorruptibility, sensitivity, and ethical behaviour as key factors that determine good governance. Critical among these is designing the systems for corruption-free delivery that requires all other factors to be automatically entwined as necessary elements.

CMS Report (2006, pp. 25-28) suggests e-governance as a possible strategy to safeguard citizens from corruption in day-to-day dealings with public agencies and emphasizes that combating corruption is vital to sustaining good governance. This survey corroborates World Bank (2003, pp. 195-196) findings that the poor

are the worst affected by petty corruption in delivery of services. Various initiatives (including e-governance) have been attempted in different parts of India (and elsewhere) for improving the delivery system, especially making it pro-poor, who have the least voice and virtually no options to exit in view of financial implications. World Bank (2006) examines 25 such innovative cases in service delivery across India. In this chapter, the author scrutinizes relevant cases from this report, other published materials, and his own experience in working over two and half decades as a member of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), to analyze whether adopting the strategy of e-governance in delivery of public services would bring good governance? Eradicating corruption is the crux of good governance and therefore, the chapter focuses on this specific issue in depth.

Most of the studies on public services reforms involving e-governance address the issue of improvement in efficiency and public convenience and are generally silent on the eradication of corruption because it is invisible in collusive sharing of benefits by the giver and the taker; its disclosure by anyone would attract legal action and generally there is no base-line for comparison. Appreciating these limitations, the author triangulates available information regarding specific cases with his own experience, in analyzing the role of e-governance in improving transparency, accountability, consistency, and such other factors, which limit the opportunities for corruption. He argues that e-governance may reduce corruption provided there is political support, focused administrative leadership, business process reengineering, sustained effort, and other conditions, as have been discussed in the chapter.

The chapter has five sections. After the introduction, the second section discusses the theoretical perspective and prepares a framework for analysis. Section three reviews the literature on the matter with specific focus on relevant cases and personal experiences of the author to draw

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