



IN HIS FOOTSTEPS: NGOs in the governance sector aim to bring accountability and transparency in policy implementation

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MAKING GOVERNANCE COUNT

Several NGOs in India are striving to bridge the gap between policy announcement and implementation

Laveena Iyer

The video begins with a familiar face from a prime-time show on one of the country's top English news channels. "Don't sell your vote, your vote is valuable," asserts senior journalist Rajdeep Sardesai. "Vote for the honest and decent candidate," says singer Palash Sen. One by one, celebrities, sports personalities and artists explain how voting is every citizen's right and duty, the provision of NOTA and the significance of knowing your *neta*. This series of voter-awareness initiatives was taken up by several NGOs in the run-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha election. There were informative vid-

eos on how to get enrolled on the voter's list, report cards on the candidates' credentials and toll-free helplines on the use of the NOTA button. While the voter turnout of 66.4% has been attributed to the voter education programmes, what happens after the election? Is there a way for the electorate to evaluate

the performance of their representative? Is there a way to voice dissent? Is there a way to hold a corrupt civil servant accountable?

An emerging bunch of NGOs in governance is increasingly proving that there is a way. They are striving hard to ensure that the electorate remains engaged and active, and that elected officials are well-equipped to execute their duties. Delhi-based Swaniti Initiative, which started in 2009, seeks to improve governance in India by delivering development solutions and offering on-the-ground implementation support to elected officials.

"We deploy a team of two or three members in a target constituency to tackle a challenge pointed out by an MP or MLA. We then conduct fieldwork, devise solutions and secure partners to deploy a pilot project and then hand over the reins to the government officials," explains Rwitwika Bhattacharya, founder, Swaniti Initiative.

Swaniti has worked on diverse government programmes, including the National Rural Livelihood Mission and Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana. While Bhattacharya was warned about bureaucratic tangles, her first few assignments allayed her fears. One of Swaniti's earliest assignments was in Barrackpore, Kolkata, where more than 50% of the 12 lakh voters belong to the working class and most of them are employed in the jute mills dotting the city's narrow lanes. "Dinesh Trivedi, the Trinamool Congress MP from Barrackpore, had found that a majority of the workers were suffering from respiratory diseases. We raised capital with the help of Rotary Clubs to set up health camps, where 80% of the workers were diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease," says Bhattacharya.

She was pleasantly surprised to see how keen the MP was to collaborate with local government

officials. The officials went a step further to initiate a health programme, promising ₹5 crore annually for the cause provided that Swaniti got the jute-mill owners on board. Once that hurdle was crossed, monthly medical camps were organised and the workers were enrolled for health insurance programmes. "We saw how an MP can play a catalytic role in bringing development to his constituency if he wants to," she adds.

Along with the health programme, Trivedi has also worked with Swaniti on the development of tourism. "As the MP responsible for this constituency, I know the problems but we don't always have a solution. That's where organisations like Swaniti come in. I do not receive assistance from the government, so the systematic study and solutions proposed by Swaniti are what we need," says Trivedi.

Even though a notable list of funders, including Rohini Nilekani and the Forbes Marshall Foundation, help Swaniti sustain its operations, Bhattacharya points out that they face many challenges. "Raising capital in India is dif-



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icult, especially in governance. What makes operations trickier is the delay in securing clearances for the 80G and 12A certificates. To enable foreign funding, you need a Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) certificate, which could take anywhere between nine months to a year," she says.

TWEAKING THE SYSTEM

In addition to these bottlenecks, there is the age-old issue of red tape, which affects administrative efficiency. When 30-year-old Arghya Sengupta was pursuing his MPhil in law at Oxford University in 2010, the debate over the contentious civil liability for nuclear damage bill in India caught his attention. "There was a huge inconsistency between the political debate surrounding it and the draft that was tabled," he says.

Sengupta collaborated with three other law students and prepared a 90-page report on ways to make the law servient and emailed this to the parliamentary standing committee on science and technology. The group was invited by the committee to present their recommendations, two of which were finally included in the bill passed by the Lok Sabha in August 2010.

Sengupta elaborates, "Often, the difference between the proposed bill and the final policy is because of inefficiently drafted laws. I saw drafting coherent laws as the solution to ensure better governance." The group, which operated as a legal think tank called the Pre-Legislative Briefing Service, registered as an NGO named Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy in December 2013.

Vidhi comprises ten fellows who conduct research and work with government agencies at the inception stage of framing laws. Their work is divided into four categories — corporate and financial regulation, judicial reforms, energy and environmental and public laws.

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One of their challenges is explaining to people what they do. Srijoni Sen, senior research fellow, Vidhi, says, “When we approach a government official, there is some suspicion about our motivation to assist them.” Sengupta believes that the solution lies in being open about their intentions. “Today, bureaucrats realise that law-making requires technical expertise. So, all we need to do is to convince them that we are not here to take their jobs away — we’re only there to assist them,” he says.

FINDING THEIR FEET

The phenomenon of NGOs assisting the government for better implementation or to identify loopholes in public policy is fairly recent. Mumbai-based Dasra, which was set up by a former investment banker couple in 2000, works as an intermediary between philanthropists and social organisations, educating funders on where and how they must give money and educating NGOs and social enterprises on how they must stay focused and aim for scale and sustainability.

Dasra published a report earlier this year on the performance of



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Research director, Vidhi Centre
for Legal Policy

governance NGOs in India, titled *Good to Great: Taking the Governance Leap in India*. Deval Sanghavi, founding partner, Dasra, says, “When we surveyed people for our report, many mistook governance NGOs for governance of NGOs or corporate governance. There is very little awareness on the work of such organisations.”

This is odd, considering that even the World Bank stresses on the importance of the work done by these organisations. As per the World Bank’s mission on poverty alleviation and the millennium development goals, a well-functioning public sector is defined by the consistency in the delivery of public services with the citizens’ preferences and a prudent management of fiscal resources. Ahmedabad-based Urban Management Centre (UMC) and Delhi-based Accountability Initiative strive for this as they provide hard evidence of the ground reality via research and advocate governments on the strategic use of funds.

When 39-year-old Meghna Malhotra was pursuing her Masters in architecture from CEPT University back in 1998, she joined the City Managers Association, a not-for-profit in Ahmedabad that was part of the global NGO network International City Managers Association (ICMA). After seeing the operational efficiency of local governments abroad and the complexity of urban issues in India, Meghna partnered with her colleague to start UMC in 2005. “There was a need to bring about professionalism in the way our cities were managed. We seek to achieve this by providing advocacy support to city and state governments and by enabling them to partner with cities from ICMA’s global network,” says Malhotra.

UMC comprises a 22-member team of architects, city planners, engineers and heritage-structure experts. The municipal perfor-



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Co-founder and partner, Dasra

mance measurement is their flagship program, where they measure a city’s performance in terms of financial self-sufficiency, provision of sanitation, affordable health-care, road networks, water supply and basic education services.

UMC also provides a platform for city-to-city partnerships. The 2004 tsunami in India led to a loss of lives and property along the eastern coast but the districts of Cuddalore and Nagapattinam were the most affected. In 2007, officials from Florida visited these districts to conduct post-tsunami recovery programs where they assisted local government officials on flood mitigation, water resources and constructing playgrounds and parks. “While the local government officials were keen on learning, we found that the district collector of Nagapattinam wasn’t so keen on building parks and playgrounds,” says Malhotra. UMC provided the funds for the material and community members volunteered for the construction but they still needed government support. Securing the right permissions took around two months. The construction began with the help of UMC staff and

UMC



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around 300 community members, and after witnessing this level of enthusiasm, the district commissioner came around during the third day of this exercise.

Beneficiaries of UMC’s work attest to the efficacy of their programmes. Raju Gupta, city engineer, Navsari Municipal Council in Gujarat, has worked with UMC since its inception. “When I go for training programmes organised by the government, it’s more like spoon-feeding. UMC seminars are more interactive. The vast experience, technical expertise and wide network of UMC members helps us handle projects well,” he says.

Delhi-based Accountability Initiative (AI) uses a different approach for improving the delivery of public services. Housed within the Centre for Policy Research, an older public-policy think tank, AI started its operations in 2009. “Our aim is to bridge the gap between research conducted and action taken. We track the flow of funds meant for various government schemes and develop mechanisms to check their implementation,” says Yamini Aiyar, director,



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Director, Accountability Initiative

AI. While both UMC and AI strive to ensure better governance, they face a cash crunch when it comes to funding research.

“It’s been quite a challenge for us to access CSR funds. Unlike a service-delivery NGO, we have no tangible impact to show the funders,” says Malhotra. CV Madhukar, director, investments, Omidyar Network, a philanthropic organisation, believes that the mindset of funders will evolve over time. “In the initial years, organisations

ernance trickling down to improvement in delivery of services,” she explains. Lt Gen Rajender Singh, CEO, DLF Foundation, the CSR arm of DLF, believes that while impact assessment is necessary, a lot of companies direct their CSR funds based on the focus area selected by the corporate organisation. “The main aim for every CSR organisation including ours is upliftment of society. An NGO is simply a vehicle leading you to the end result. Every organisation has picked one focus area, like we have chosen skill development,” he says.

In a bid to raise more awareness about their work and also highlight the plight of the poor, some NGOs turn to the print medium. And for good reason. In a 2010 World Bank report titled *Public Sentinel: News Media Governance and Reform*, researchers Timothy Besley and Robin Burgess documented that a 1% increase in newspaper circulation in India resulted in a 2.4% increase in public food distribution and a 5.5% increase in calamity relief expenditure.

Khabar Lahariya, which started operations in 2002, trains rural women to produce and distribute a weekly newspaper. “Most of these women have been educated till the 12th grade. After a three-month

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would donate to orphanages and old-age homes. Then, they started donating to NGOs working for education and healthcare,” he says. Aiyar voices a similar concern. “There needs to be a change in the mindset of the CSR folks. Mostly, funds are provided for organisations that have a concrete physical output. Our work is not the same — funders need to be more patient to see the benefits of improving gov-

training period where they learn how to report, write, edit, use a computer and camera, they are inducted into the organisation,” says Disha Mullick, who overlooks marketing and sustainability at the New Delhi-based organisation.

Khabar Lahariya is not alone. Charkha Development Communication Network also gives citizens a platform to report and write about their issues. Founded in



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1994, Charkha works to highlight the plight of the people in conflict areas such as Jammu and Kashmir and Chattisgarh, which are often ignored by the mainstream media. “We conduct workshops to train local educated youths on writing, reporting and editing,” says Anshu Meshack, CEO, Charkha. But Charkha faces its own set of challenges. Masheck says, “The fundamental challenges are funding and finding and retaining socially conscious, committed people. Funders seek immediate and tangible change, while improving governance is more about altering mindsets, changing attitudes and moving communities.”

WHERE'S THE MONEY?

While CSR funds are difficult to come by for governance NGOs, the route to foreign funding isn't easy either. Vidhi's Sen explains, “We will not apply for an FCRA certificate because we might be perceived to be lobbying for a certain organisation while assisting in drafting a law, which could be tricky.” Three of the six organisa-

tions mentioned in this story have not applied for an FCRA certificate. All this raises the need for alternative models of funding, where Dasra plays a role. Neera Nundy, founding partner, Dasra, says, “It is challenging for smaller NGOs to access CSR funds. Thus, there is an even bigger role for intermediaries to inform corporates on how to strategically contribute.”

While organisations such as Khabar Lahariya have a community-based model on their agenda, others highlight the need for domestic philanthropists to contribute funds to Indian organisations. As per Kotak's *Top of the Pyramid, 2014* report, the growth of philanthropic spends in India has not been proportional to overall growth in ultra-HNI wealth. Malhotra believes that CSR arms of corporates need to change their mindset about governance NGOs. “If the public system works more efficiently, delivery of services will be smoother. For instance, in road construction, if red tape reduces, there would be better roads. Won't that help the private



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CEO, Charkha Development
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sector as well? One must understand that if cities function well, the private sector also benefits.”

Aiyar says, “It is time to build a dialogue with philanthropists. The scale of problems in India is huge and we have philanthropists who can afford to contribute towards these causes.” Swaniti's Bhattacharya also reiterates the need for a change of perspective. “Giving in governance is relatively new in the Indian context and local donors are putting in place a structure that would help them identify the NGOs who are doing good work”

Dasra's founding partners are optimistic about the future of philanthropy and the growth of governance NGOs in India. While Nundy believes that the key is in putting a framework to the largely unorganised social sector, Sanghavi believes time will do the trick. “We need to make it feasible for educated professionals to work in the social sector. Organisations must stay focused, aim for scale and demonstrate potential. And philanthropists must concentrate on social and not economic value,” says Sanghavi.

So, what's stopping the philanthropists? A 2013 report by Bain & Co titled *India Philanthropy Report* surveyed 180 HNIs on their philanthropic activities. Their main grouse with regard to NGOs was a lack of communication and ways to assess impact. Around 26% of those surveyed claimed they would increase their contributions if these issues were resolved. The report concludes that NGOs in hard-to-measure sectors, where the impact created is largely intangible and only seen over time, will continue to face challenges. It seems like it is time for non-profits and donors to communicate and devise a standardised impact-measurement system to walk down resolution road, which ultimately has the same end — good governance. 