e-Governance and Service Delivery-
Scope and Implementation Issues

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ABSTRACT

e-Governance is widely accepted as an effective tool of service delivery and equated with Good Governance by all developed countries in general and developing countries like India in particular. Information and Communication processing technologies are developing faster than ever before and these aid the process of development and good governance. Advancement in Internet technology is creating new aspirations and expectations among people for enhanced and quality service delivery. It is said that networking technology has made virtual reality possible wherein a person can work and shop sitting at home. Judging by this standard a feasibility study of the tool in selected areas of service delivery like issue of certificates, implementation of welfare schemes, and management of disasters were taken up along with implementation issues to examine how far the tool meet the aspirations of the people who should be at the center stage of any e-governance project. The result of the study is that the scope of e-Governance is limited in its applicability for enhanced service delivery if it is not implemented with a holistic approach in certain areas of service delivery. The study also juxtaposed the collection of taxes like basic taxes (land tax) and building tax from the citizens by using e-mode in urban areas with the existing mechanism of collecting taxes manually in rural areas. The service delivery areas identified for the study pertains to the Revenue Department of the State of Kerala in South India where the government citizen interface is the maximum so that the findings are worthwhile lessons for any policy makers in government in the developing countries.
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Introduction

This paper examines the feasibility of e-Governance for service delivery and Governance Reforms in certain areas of citizen government interface. e-Governance is widely accepted as an effective tool of service delivery and equated with Good Governance by all developed countries in general and developing countries like India in particular. But a feasibility study of the tool in selected areas of service delivery like issue of certificates implementation of welfare schemes and management of disasters proved that the scope of e-Governance is limited in its applicability for enhanced service delivery if it is not implemented with a holistic approach. The study also juxtaposed the collection of taxes like basic taxes (land tax) and building tax from the citizens by using e-mode in urban areas with the existing mechanism of collecting taxes manually in rural areas. The service delivery areas identified for the study pertains to the Revenue Department of the State of Kerala in South India where the government citizen interface is the maximum so that the findings are worthwhile lessons for any policy makers in government in the developing countries.

e-Governance for Good Governance- A Citizen perspective

Information and Communication processing technologies are developing faster than ever before and these aid the process of development and good governance. As the ultimate goal of good governance is the betterment of the lives of the citizens the advancement in the technological fields are useful for good governance if people could be provided with prompt adequate and timely services through information technology, Governments must be able to avail the unique opportunity of interacting with the people effectively. Information technology should ensure openness and accessibility to the citizens. It should take public services and the government literally to the doorstep of the citizens through information technology. E-governance shall facilitate the delivery of government services to the masses through procedural simplicity, speed and convenience. E-governance is also seen as a multi dimensional concept that improves efficiency in
administration, brings about transparency and leads to the reduction of cost in running the
government. E-governance and e-government initiatives shall enable citizens to access
government documents, publications, file taxes, and renew licenses and permits from any
location with an internet connection. E-government also implies the ability of people at
large to obtain government services through electronic means enabling access to
government information and completion of government transactions on an anywhere
anytime basis.

A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, former President of India visualizes e-governance as a
transparent smart e-governance with seamless access, secure and authentic flow of
information crossing the interdepartmental barrier and providing a fair and unbiased
service to the citizen. Bringing the internet and governance together means bringing the
greatest technology of our times to bear on the most fundamental concerns of our society
E-governance should not be just another facet of Governance or one more interface
between citizen and government. E-governance is about redefining the vision and the
scope of the entire relationship between citizen and government. It will enable us to
specifically address some of the long-stalemated issues in public affairs with appropriate
conceptual breakthroughs. Government online as a concept is different from the
traditional model of the Government. Government online is supposed to provide
information, services or products through electronic means, by and from Government
agencies, at any given moment and place, offering an extra value for all participating
players. This model of the government provides various entities facility of accessing
systems online in order to improve the efficiency of the parties.

E-governance is one of the strategies for good governance, which helps effective
service delivery. Good governance has become a subject of interest in every day
discussions among political social, economical and business circles. Effective public
service delivery is one of the parameters to measure the goodness of governance. All
governments should be willing to formulate new strategies for effective public service
delivery. Such strategies include

1. Developing partnership
2. Mobilizing civil society groups
3. Repositioning bureaucracy
4. Decentralization
5. Use of ITC

ICT is a potential tool of efficient public service delivery. This is mainly because for communication by means of information technology time, place and physical presence are no longer essential. It offers new possibilities for establishing all kinds of links between people and organization. It increases the quality and quantity of interaction with people. It enhances the transparency and access to organization. Government agencies can be consulted through the Internet and it is possible to share information for the organization. The different departments can also be integrated. The boundaries of an organization become electronically permeable. Networking technology has made virtual reality possible wherein a person can work and shop sitting at home.

E-governance can play the following important roles in the improvement of public service delivery.
1. Increases efficiency by automation
2. Supports effective decentralization in decision making
3. Increases accountability of the public service agencies to citizens
4. Improves resource management.
5. Offers effective communication
6. Increases accessibility
7. Provides comprehensive data base
8. Facilitate strategic planning
9. Enables reduction of paper work with the use of E-mail and electronic data interchange
10. Supplies information related to the market

Judging by these wider possibilities, objectives of e-governance must go far beyond mere computerization of back office operations. E-governance has to fundamentally change the operations of government and implies a new set of responsibilities to citizens and the government. But curiously if considered on this background, one can see that the Revenue department of Government of Kerala most often does not function to the expectations of the people even though some e-governance
projects were implemented in certain areas of service delivery. So the present study
analyses the scope of e-Governance in certain identified areas of service delivery in the
Revenue Department of State of Kerala. The study also examines the possibility of e-
Governance in absolute terms eliminating the government official – citizens interface
altogether in some areas of service delivery.

**Citizen to government (C2G) interface in the State of Kerala**

Kerala is a small State (area 38863 square kilometers, population 31 million)
located in South Western corner of India. It boasts of a higher Human Development
Index than most other States in India. The State has a unique 91% literacy rate, the
highest in India. The rural and urban divide is not so conspicuous in the State. In service
delivery front, Transparency International ranks Kerala as least corrupt State in the
country as per a survey conducted in 2005. Kerala has the lowest rate of population
growth in India, with a fertility rate of 1.6 per parent. Kerala is governed via a
parliamentary system of representative democracy. The service sector (including tourism,
public administration, banking and finance, transportation and communication)
constitutes around 60% of GSDP.

Revenue Department in the State of Kerala is the core administrative department
in Government of Kerala. It is the department that touches upon almost all aspects of a
citizen’s life. The department of revenue is the custodian of all lands and is concerned
with all land disposals. The work relating to maintenance of land records levy and
collection of land taxes are looked after by the department. Revenue Department plays a
vital role in the administration of the state. Generally Revenue Department deals with the
issues related with land, maintenance of documents, protection of public land, collection
of land revenue etc. Today the department is shouldered with a multitude of activities
and responsibilities. Right from the village offices to the district collectorates the
Revenue Department is dealing with nearly 150 subjects concerning common man such
as issuance of various certificates, maintenance of land records, collection of land
revenue, collection of revenue recovery, settling land survey disputes, conduct of
elections, handling of law and order situation, calamity relief and rehabilitation, disaster
management and mitigation programmes and so on. In short the department is directly or
indirectly involved in all situations of the day to day administration of the state. It also coordinates activities of various departments and developmental programmes of the state.

The Kerala state consists of 14 districts 21 revenue divisions, 63 taluks and 1577 villages. Each district is headed by a District Collector. Each Revenue Division is headed by a Revenue Divisional Officer/Sub Collector. Each taluk is headed by a Tahsildar. Each village is headed by a Village Officer. The village office is the basic unit of the Revenue Department.

**Service delivery areas and e-Governance initiatives**

The following are the important service delivery areas in the Revenue Department.

1. Issue of various entitlement and status certificates
2. Appointment of physical handicapped in Government services
3. Providing assistance under the Chief Minister’s distress relief fund
4. Disaster Management
5. Financial Assistance under social security scheme
6. Financial Assistance to victims of Motor accidents
7. Assignment of land
8. Collection of land tax and building tax
9. Issue of certified copies of revenue records
10. Issue of explosives and arms license
11. Redressal of public grievance
12. Issue of record of right to the occupants of land

With a view to mitigate the hardships of the citizens in paying taxes an information technology based project called FRIENDS (Fast, Reliable, Instant, Efficient, Network for Disbursement of Services.) has been launched in the state which has helped to eliminate middlemen, delays and long queues. This is a front-end interface for the people to access services without waiting for back end computerization so that the benefit of E-governance can be immediately made available to citizens. This has been the bottom line of the FRIENDS project in Kerala. This is an IT enabled single window front-end interface for availing a range of popular services like payment of taxes and utility charges and renewal of licenses without waiting for back end computerization. The FRIENDS
Centres have been set up in 14 district headquarters, thereby limiting the facility only to the customers in urban areas. Each FRIENDS centre receives almost 1000 visitors everyday and users are delighted with the service levels. The average waiting time is 10 minutes and transactions are completed in 2 to 5 minutes. The transaction here is courteous and corruption free. Usually a citizen in Kerala has to interact with at least 8 to 10 government departments for accessing routine services. Traditional payment system necessitates visiting each of these government offices and waiting in tedious queues. Some transaction takes as long as a day to be completed. The philosophy of FRIENDS is to treat a citizen who is paying for the services as a valued customer who must be given the respect that he or she deserves. The indicative list of services offered by the friends counters are water and power utility payments, property tax, professional tax, building tax, land tax, revenue recovery, fee for new ration card, one time vehicle tax, motor vehicle tax etc.

DC Suite (District Collector's Suite) is another web-based software application developed by National Informatics Centre for delivery of almost all the services in the Revenue Department. Even though this software have been installed in all the collectorates the project has not fully been operationalised, due to non availability of database and some of the services rendered by the department are not fully amenable to the e-Delivery mechanism. However computer print outs for status and entitlement certificates are being issued using this software not rising up to the expectations of the e-Governance model of the service delivery.

Objectives of the study

The present study focused on the governance of the Revenue Department in Kerala with the following objectives.

1. To examine the system of revenue administration and the various services rendered by the department in the backdrop of advancements in e-governance.
2. To evaluate the existing system of service delivery viz. collection of taxes, issue of certificates, implementation of welfare measures, registration of complaints, disaster management and to see whether the application of e-
governance can bring about improvement in providing these services to the people.

3. To analyse the scope and implementation issues of e-Governance in selected areas of service delivery viz collection of taxes, issue of certificates, welfare measures and disaster management.

**Database and methodology**

Both primary and secondary data are used for the study. The sample for the study consisted of rural as well as urban people, officials and experts. Multi stage sampling was adopted for the selection of District, Taluk and Villages in the State of Kerala and the respondents therefrom. While selecting the respondents due consideration was given to their status so as to include representatives of high and low income strata in the beneficiary group. The total sample for the study consists of 60 beneficiaries and 20 officials and 20 experts. 3 sets of interview schedules were developed. One set for the beneficiaries, one for the officials and another one for experts. Primary data were collected from the beneficiaries, officials and experts with the help of interview schedules during October and December 2008.

**Analysis of Data on Service Delivery:**

- **Collection of taxes**

  Mainly two kinds of taxes are being collected by the Revenue Department through the lowest unit of the Department viz Village Offices. Revenue Department is empowered to levy and collect Basic Land Taxes and Building Taxes. Procedures followed for collection of taxes have been analyzed so as to examine its scope for online arrangements.

  Land tax is collected on the basis of extent of land owned by a citizen. The rate of tax is determined on the basis of location of the land. Different rates are fixed for the land in Urban and rural areas. Even though the basic tax is collected in village offices complaints on rates of tax levied and revision of tax have to be filed before the Tahsildar. Building Tax is usually fixed on the basis of ground area of the building constructed. Different rates are fixed for residential buildings and buildings for other purposes according to the locality in which the buildings are constructed. The procedure for
assessing building tax is that the owner of the building has to make an application to the Tahsildar in the prescribed format. The tax is to be remitted to the Village Officer on the basis of the demand notice issued from the Tahsildar. Complaints are to be filed before the Revenue Divisional Officers within 30 days of the assessment. Majority of the taxpayers (about 72.97%) interviewed experienced difficulty in remitting the basic tax in time manually. Respondents having graduate and postgraduate education invariably favoured the use of electronic devices for speedy services. 70% of the respondents favoured the view with considerable inter regional variation in opinion that manual mode of collecting taxes cannot totally be dispensed with, except in the cases of routine collection of taxes. The result of ANOVA revealed that the inter group and intra group variation was statistically insignificant and this led to the conclusion that the majority belonging to all categories shared the same view of paying taxes.

Keeping in view the potential of information technology the experts and officials were asked to express their attitude towards the feasibility of E-governance in strengthening the collection of taxes. Personal contacts with the officials are inevitable in remitting the taxes wherever there are complaints on tax levied and changes of holdings. Therefore e-Governance mechanism does not seem feasible. 30% are the land holdings and 20% of the buildings constructed are under dispute between officials and customers and collection of taxes has been a long drawn out process. FRIENDS Centres are offering facilities to remit taxes electronically, but there the taxes are being received only if the land or building owner has no complaints on rates levied and there is no revision in question. Simplification of procedures on levy of taxes making it suitable to electronic platform may solve the issues to some extent. The policy makers and electronic experts sit together for such process re-engineering.

*Issue of certificates*

The effectiveness of the Revenue Department is well appreciated by the people when they are able to obtain various certificates such as income certificate, caste certificate, possession certificate location certificate, identity certificate etc without much hardship and delay. Keeping the formalities for issuing the certificates in view, various categories of beneficiaries were interviewed to ascertain whether time lag, delay or any
procedural complexities are involved in obtaining various certificates from the revenue department in the context of enormous potentials that the ITC offers.

It is worthwhile to note that almost all the beneficiaries experienced procedural difficulties in obtaining various certificates from the revenue office. It requires special mention here that e-governance if properly implemented can accelerate the process of issuing certificates and can reduce complexities and formalities involved in such issue. Recognising the importance of issuing certificates in the day to day functioning of the Revenue Department an attempt was made in the present study to assess the perception of experts in ICT and officials of the Department as to the scope of e-Governance in strengthening the issue of certificates. It is interesting to note that 51 percent of respondent officials rejected the idea of computerised certificates and criticised the feasibility of ICT in issue of certain kinds of certificates from Revenue Department.

The procedures adopted for issue of and the contents of various certificates do not fit for easy electronic management. For eg: in the case of income certificate unless the person is employed in an organised sector it is not easy to capture the data on income which may ever change and without personal enquiry by an officer in every case the department is not in a position to state and certify his income at a particular point of time. Documents proving income, ration card, salary certificates etc have to be verified for issuing the certificate. Possession of land, solvency, destitute-ship, relationship, residence, religion etc need certification for various purposes of the citizen. These are also flexible status in character and cannot be generated by citizen in e-mode applying a static database in the computer software. Experts are of the opinion that e-governance can effectively contribute to overcome the procedural complexities involved in issuing certificates. But none of the experts has claimed e-governance is totally applicable in the matter of issuing certificates in the Revenue Department. In some of the Taluks certificates are being issued by way of computer printouts. But online arrangements of issuing computerised certificates based on a central data bank harnessing the potentials of E-governance have not been implemented due to the changing nature of the basic data. Digitising of all personal records and maintaining updated information on a database as and when it take place may enable citizens to get these certificate delivered to them in real time as the process of sorting, searching and accessing information will be
simplified. Citizen shall get their records updated by checking the website. By verifying these data, Village Offices can provide the facility to collect certificates on demand without any delay.

- Relief and welfare measures

The mandate of any democratic government is to provide a set of services in an efficient, convenient, equitable and cost effective manner so as to ensure the welfare and well being of its citizens and to facilitate the growth of economic activities. Revenue Department can promote all-round welfare by effective delivery of the services towards distress relief, welfare activities, disaster management and registration of complaints.

Keeping in view of this an attempt is made to analyse the views of beneficiaries and officials so as to ascertain the existing mechanism in relief and welfare activities and to assess the scope for strengthening these measures with the help of e-governance. 75.33 percent of the beneficiaries experienced difficulties in availing relief and welfare schemes in manually operated system of service delivery. However only 55% of beneficiaries suggested e-Governance could improve the situation. There is no considerable variation in general in the responses of respondents in urban and rural areas. There is a general identity of opinion among experts (90%) and officials (82%) regarding the scope of e-governance in strengthening the implementation of relief and welfare measures.

Registration of complaints with authorities in rural areas using manual mechanism remains highly difficult for 56.66 percent of the respondents. Only 6.67 percent of rural population preferred registration of complaints through electronic media. In the case of urban population 40 percent agreed that the present paper system of complaint registration mechanism is not difficult. It is revealed that people in Kerala generally prefer registering complaints direct with office and like to have direct face-to-face contact to settle their dispute and complaints. But here, it is noteworthy that 91.66 percent of the officials favoured the e-governance in registering complaints and monitoring grievance effectively. This revealed that officials are in favour of e-Governance to register complaints so as to avoid direct contact with the complainants. But experts are of the opinion (87%) that if online arrangements are made the complaint gets forwarded to the concerned officer for necessary action and also goes to a database for monitoring the grievance. Internal facility can be built in to forward and transfer complaints from one
office to another minimising response time. Senior officers can also monitor the complaints pending with various offices. The way complaints are being attended to can also be tracked by complainants so that they can see for themselves whether action is being taken. As the whole module can be linked to the Internet it is possible for officers to monitor complaints received by them from anywhere and allows them the facility to issue virtual instructions for taking immediate remedial action. Apart from this better ways of monitoring, every complaint requires a final settlement and satisfaction of the person for which personal enquiries and involvement of the officials becomes necessary drawing the matter outside the scope of e-Governance.

As far as the disaster management is concerned the rural and the urban population are suffering the same level of difficulty (93.33 percent) to get the benefits and the existing disaster management mechanism (both manual and electronic) is poorly felt in the grass root level (Only 6.67 percent). The capabilities of ICT can be utilised efficiently for various activities in disaster management like:

- Disseminating information about impending disasters
- Servicing the request for information or assistance from citizens in the affected areas
- Co-coordinating rescue and recovery operations
- Assessing the status of resources available
- Procuring required relief supplies from vendors or donors
- Eliminating the time consuming paper oriented processes of approval authorisation etc and recording transactions.

But in post disaster rescue and relief operations e-Governance has limited applicability especially when the disaster affects the network.

**Concluding Remarks**

Generally service providers and implementing agencies of e-Governance have the presumption that anything electronic is systematically better than the manual or non-electronic process. Such a presumption is prevalent among the common man also, that could often lead to plenty of electronics but no gains to the service delivery. The digital world can be quite colorful and attractive. A form and a report certainly look more
impressive on the PC screen. The ultimate aim should be better and hassle free service to the citizen and not issuing a computer print out for every service.

We have to appreciate the fundamental difference between computerization and e-government. The former seeks to replace existing processes by their electronic counterparts. The latter observes the needs of the citizens and introduces system that can precisely meet those needs. It is the difference between being computer-centric and being citizen-centric. E-governance should focus on citizens and not on computers.

The aim of e-governance is to exploit power of the technologies in re-defining the government processes in an innovative manner. While the mere introduction of computers or computerization can make some difference, the idea is to make a significant difference in the way by which the government serves the citizens. Finding methods and designing systems or transforming inline to online should be the mantra of E-government. E-governance shall focus on transforming the process of implementing the governmental functions and not on translating the existing process as such through the electronic media.

One of the main reasons for the failure of e-government projects in the State of Kerala is the excessive emphasis on procurement of hardware and setting up expensive network even before the application software is designed and developed. This happened in many government departments in Kerala. More often the e-government projects tend to be hardware driven rather than software driven. This is to show physical and financial progress ignoring the functional progress. The application software is the heart of an e-government project.

The track record of e-government projects reveals a low success rate of 15 % in Kerala. The risk of failure or unsustainability over medium and long term is very high. This drives us to the irresistible conclusion that we have to proceed with caution in implementing e-government projects. E-governance shall plan the pilot first and not the rollout. Adopting the pilot approach would enable us to access more accurately certain factors, which are unclear at the stage the project is conceived. A pilot also enables us to apply course corrections.

ICT may considerably reduce the need for human intervention but cannot eliminate it altogether as the Kerala experience shows. The employees of the enterprise
play a pivotal role in the success of a e-government project. Without their ownership and commitment, the project is bound to fail somewhere down the line in some significant way. Involvement of the employees, change of mindset, capacity building etc are important and hence the e-governance shall focus on people and not on systems. If the employees feel that the project is not useful the progress is bound to be slow over a period of time.

Another important finding is that officials are generally reluctant to accept the ICT as a total solution to the problems posed in the delivery of public services. It is seen that they have a fear of total transparency. This is an important reason for slow progress in implementation. The people of Kerala generally dislike revealing their entitlements on landed property. This is particularly true in the case of land holdings in different places by the same owner. They want secrecy of land in their custody. Benami (enjoying land holding registered in fictitious name) is also prevalent. As computerisation of land records means transparency of holdings, people of Kerala are reluctant to the new model of e-Governance. This is found as the fundamental reason for the failure of the project of Land record Computerisation in Kerala

A Service Delivery Project to be called an e-Governance project strictly in terms of the conceptual framework of e-Governance the services should be made available on line. The beneficiary of the service should not be asked to contact the officers in person at the office, which is located at some distant place from the place of the user. The user must be able to apply for the service through on line and get the service on line so far as possible. If this kind of elimination of time and distance is not achieved the ultimate goal of the service delivery using ICT tool, remain unattained. Judged by this criteria, most of the e-Governance projects implemented in Kerala are not worthy of calling by the name e-Governance Projects.
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