Technology Adoption for Programme Delivery

What is the issue?

- India has emerged as a pioneer in building digital tools to improve program governance, over the period.
- However, leveraging technology platforms for effective program delivery poses unique challenges, which policymakers need to be aware of.

What are the concerns?

- Using technology requires learning new ways to make demands and withdraw benefits, and new norms and modes of local behaviour.
- So for most citizens, the use of new tech-savvy tools can be alienating and intimidating.
- Local governments and citizens face problems in using technology, with delays and exclusion due to poor infrastructure and connectivity.
- Rapid deployment of new technologies is at times seen as attacks on past improvements in delivery. It is also giving rise to new forms of corruption.
- However, these are said to be the initial glitches in the process of transition to digital ways of interacting with the government.

What are the challenges involved?

- **Problem identification** - Technology must be seen as a tool, and not a solution in itself.
- E.g. Aadhaar and Direct Benefit Transfers (DBTs) are just the tools to address the problems of payment leakages due to fake beneficiaries and not the solutions in themselves.
- Aadhaar is a proof of identity, not eligibility or priority. Likewise, DBT can only provide a secure pipeline to transfer payments.
- Neither of the tools solves questions on who should be given greater priority for transfers.
- These tools cannot confirm if the person receiving the benefit is in most need of it, as exclusion continues to plague cash transfer programmes such as social pensions in India.

- **State capability** - There exists an idea of removing the human interface from the delivery landscape by making processes as automated as possible.
- This is rooted in viewing the ‘last-mile’ cadres as being powerful, corrupt

entities who are indifferent to the needs of citizens.

- But notably, skill sets, capabilities, and size of the local bureaucracy are critical to ensure that benefit transfer systems are inclusive and citizen-friendly.
- For instance, in implementing electronic payments through DBT, -

i. camps have to be organised
ii. citizen information and consent for data sharing must be sought
iii. program users need to be informed and counselled
iv. bank accounts and identification proofs need to be produced

- All these tasks require various agencies to coordinate at the local level.
- But these are plagued by understaffed, unmotivated, and over-tasked Panchayat and block office.
- The effective use of technology requires a far more capable state, for the technology to enhance state capabilities as intended.
- **Power asymmetries** - With increased use of technology, programmers, government IT agencies and system developers are increasingly powerful in the new tech-savvy welfare state.
- These agencies hold vast amounts of private data on transactions and attributes.
- Also, the very language, nature, and production of technology make it opaque and distant from ordinary citizens.
- E.g. if a local Panchayat official was found to be corrupt, complaint can be made to the superiors or politicians

- But complaints triggered by misuse or errors in the use of tech tools can be difficult to pick up, comprehend and process, making targeted beneficiaries powerless.

What is to be done?

- There has to be clear identification and understanding of the problem which a particular technology would solve.
- Consistently assessing the efficacy of the tools deployed is essential, for them to be the solutions for the problems identified.
- But the challenge of eligibility determination requires a very different set of interventions such as social registries.

- Besides, technology only changes the requirements for human resources; it does not rule out the need for strong local staff.
- Given the heterogeneity across India’s villages and cities, the state capability has to be enhanced significantly.
- Policy makers need to be mindful of the new power asymmetries created by

the use of technology.

- Governments should invest in methods to balance these asymmetries.
- The recent regulations and laws following the Aadhaar judgment must be complemented by proper systems.
- This should allow citizens to query and update their information through online and offline methods.
- E.g. clearly codified data exchange, privacy and consent frameworks, etc
- In all, reaping maximum gains from digital resources needs complementary investments in regulation, laws, and human resources.

Source: Indian Express

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