



PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INFORMATION OPENNESS: PARADIGM SHIFT FOR EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

Public Administration is an important actor of governance process as well as managing instrument of public service delivery system. Presently, electronic governance has become a common term to describe all of the processes, administrative and democratic, that combine to constitute public sector operations. To formulate new strategies for effective public service delivery, the Government and administration needs to develop partnership, mobilizing civil society groups, re-positioning bureaucracy, devolution and decentralization of powers as well as use of information and communication technology. Public Administration is the mechanism or means to achieve the desired objectives of development and governance. The goals of governance are now extend from efficiency, effectiveness and economy to accountability, responsiveness, empowerment and participation. Such types of goals are increasing pressure on the administrative apparatus generated by civil society organizations to share information and make decisions transparent for responsive governance. Public administration is the only instrument of opening up of governmental information to the public domain for effective governance.

Keywords: *Public Administration, Governance, Information, Openness, Transparency, Administrative Procedure, Accountability, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), Citizen Participation etc.*

Introduction

Transparency in the functioning of public services is an ethical operational value in the sphere of public administration. It can be interpreted as an ontological drift of the responsibility of the subjects towards the other one. Transparency represents the very field of administrative action particularly a forum of communicative action as a vector of public responsibility because transparent society is a result of global communication. It has an ethical value derived from public trust, which is operational in the administrative practice as social practice. So, transparency represents the facilitation of participation for all possible stakeholders in the decision making act, taking inclusive measures where necessary in order to ensure participation (Antonio Sandu, 2016: 60-61).

The Indian society since independence has gone in for purposeful social information. Information is considered as the central part of governance process in the present era of liberalization, privatization and globalization. The proper and timely supply of information is the base for the success and development of any organization whether it belongs to the business activity or the governance process. The issue of right to information has gained considerable importance because it is the key to strengthening participatory democracy and ushering in citizen centered governance. Access to information can empower the poor and they can get information about public policies and actions, which are launched for their welfare time to time. Right to information opens up government's records to public scrutiny, thereby arming citizens with a vital tool to inform them about what the government does for their welfare and at which cost and speed. Information about functioning of government also enables citizens to participate in the governance process effectively. In a real sense, right to information is a basic tool for effective governance.

Public administration is not only responsible for adopting legislation on openness, but it is responsible for bringing law into practice and for ensuring an open, sound and responsible administration of public affairs based on the rule of law especially in countries having long-standing secrecy attitudes and practices. So, all the aspects of governance, good governance, transparency, accountability openness etc. depend upon the efficiency and efficacy of public administration because public administration is the main instrument for providing information.

Openness Initiatives in India

Openness means giving everyone the right to have access to information about the various decisions taken by Government. All the governments in the world intend to conceal the information from the people, though the nature, degree and extent thereof varies. While democratic countries have a higher degree of openness vis a vis authoritarian regime. Nowhere in the world the government is functioning totally open. For public administration openness means willingness to communicate the information about successes and failures of governance process. The way that the different branches of the administration can open up towards the citizens naturally depends on the type of work they undertake and where they are situated in the administrative system hierarchically.



The initiative of open government data was started in India through the National Data Sharing and Accessibility Policy (NDSAP), 2012. This policy is the result of Principle 10 of the United Nations (UN) Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992 held at Rio de Janeiro and section 4(2) of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005. The UN Declaration pointed out that “each individual shall have appropriate access to information.... State shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available.” The section 4(2) of the RTI Act, 2005 emphasized that the public authority to take steps for providing as much information suo motu to the public at regular intervals, so that the public have minimum resort to the use of this Act to obtain information. The principles of openness, flexibility, transparency, legal conformity, protection of intellectual property, formal responsibility, professionalism, standards, interoperability, quality, security, efficiency, accountability, sustainability and privacy are the essential part of data sharing and accessibility as recognized by the policy (NDSAP, 2012:1). This policy provides for the nomination of Chief Data Officer, data contributors, establishment of NDSAP cell, identify datasets, publish catalogs and resources, prepare negative list (non shareable data), regular release of datasets, monitor and manage the open data programme of the department (Guidelines NDSAP, 2015:11). Further, Gazette notification regarding Government Open Data License of NDSAP incorporates the terms and conditions of use of data and disputes redress mechanism (Gazette Notification, 2017:1).

Administrative Structure and Procedure for Openness of Informations

Administrative procedure is the prime instrument of governance, which can be used to define specific tasks. Through the establishing and applying the administrative procedure positively, a greater level of transparency, efficiency and coherence can be achieved. Structural management is the central part of any organization for proper functioning. Archives and registers are the appropriate possible means for securing and systematic arrangement of information. Often information offices are responsible for general communication to serve the public. It may be advantageous to have several specific information departments/information officers as expert body for answering different types of requests. Information offices should be closely linked to the experts and library of the institution for proper knowledge management. The information officers essentially inculcate the communication skills, service skills, organization skills, language skills etc. for proper providing information efficiently. In India the task of providing information under RTI Act, 2005 is attached as an additional charge with the existing offices. For redressing the feeling of the extra burden of existing offices, a separate unit/office may be started with efficient and separate staff in this regard.

In digitalized societies websites of public administration tend to become the new service counters. Through these counters, citizens are able to submit their proposals, complaints and receive information about the work and decisions of the institution. For proper management of such types of services, the staff should be familiar with the relevant procedure and modern techniques. Information officers must be service-minded, unbiased and able to communicate difficult information in easy accessible or local languages. Digitalization of administration definitely leads to an easier and faster sharing of information, not only within the institution but also between different public authorities. It can also be used to supply the information to general public directly through modern communication technologies. Digital service supplying units must be attentive to make digital information accessible in an intelligible manner for ensuring openness.

Codification of administrative procedures is one of the most powerful and effective tools of administrative simplification. Sometimes in lieu of general laws of administrative procedure, number of non-legally binding codes of good behavior, ethics have been developed with the aim to simplify the administrative procedure.

Medium of Disseminating the Information

1. Information provided at own initiative

Some countries like United Kingdom and the United States provide for disclosure of basic information at its own initiative. The basic information means information on the function, organization, accounts, procedures and standards of the public authority as well as major decisions affecting society. This is a good practice that public organizations provide information of their activities to the public in simple and accessible form i.e. print, broadcast and electronic forms of dissemination. In India as per Right to Information Act, 2005 it is mandatory to maintain and computerize the records as well as disclosure of information suo motu by public authorities on a proactive basis for transparent governance (Government of India, RTI Act, 2005, Section 4). The printed information can be kept in public domain through the brochures, booklets, newsletters, reports etc.

2. Radio and TV

Audio visual media is effective instrument to provide information for common public. The radio and TV are the cheapest as well as easiest mode of providing information to almost all groups of society, including the illiterate part of the population. Moreover, it is effective instrument to reach remote areas of the country.

3. Information and Communication Technologies

The information and communication technologies (ICT) provide an opportunity to public administration about publishing reports, policies, and guidelines through on-line services. The internet is frequently used by public administration around the world as a way to inform citizens about public affairs. It has its ability to process huge amount of information in a speedy and systematic manner. It is easy to update and combine different types of information such as text, pictures, sound and film. ICT is the vital importance to the field of development public policy and public administration research. Governments and their stakeholders have enthusiastically embraced the claim that ICT usage can enhance public sector efficiency and effectiveness. It assists the governments in decision making, communication, implementation and evaluation of welfare policies, programmes and projects. It also provides efficiency in clerical functions which involve accepting, storing, processing and transmitting information (Joshua O. Miluwi and Hina Rashid, 2013: 247).

4. Database Management

It is the another way to provide the information systematically by creating the database of key figures, benchmarks of specific performance areas, and analyses of particular sectors emphasizing special problems or best practices. Grid computing is a new paradigm in distributed computing environments. It envisages resources sharing, exchange, discovery, selection and aggregation of resources over the grid of computer system aiming at ubiquitous and adequate resources provision for any activities in the grid including file transfer, replica location service etc (K. Garg, 2011: 205). In this process the centers at National, State, District and local levels need to be connected with each other for effective offer of citizen services.

5. Public Relation Office

Campaigning through public relation office is a useful tool for sensitizing entire populations regarding general public matters as well as public awareness about the right to information. In addition to information provided by public administration, general education can be used as a medium of imparting information and administration is involving the public relation office in the process about information management regarding public affairs management. Government can provide financial support to all kinds of general education activities undertaken by a number of schools, universities as well as private organizations.

6. Establishment of Public Facilitation Center

These centers can provide information regarding services, schemes and procedures of governance activities. They may be helpful in highlighting the position of waiting list and action taken through every day updated computer screens. Public administration should guide the citizen by designing or publishing the request forms. It can avoid the unnecessary harassment of public as well as saves the time of administration.

Citizen Participation in Decision Process for Information Openness

The main objective of providing governmental information to citizens is to increase their interest and participation in the working of public administration. This involvement encourages the possibility of active participation of citizen in the decision making process as well as finalization of priority list of public services. Through this action public administration machinery can receive valuable information about citizens' preferences about the public delivery system. This enables the administration and legislature to make proper and timely decisions. Citizen involvement in the administrative process is an important element for making the administration efficient and effective. The figure shows that how citizens can be involved in public sector decision-making process.



However, in order to get the positive response from citizens' participation, it is important that they feel their real involvement in decision making process. Public administration can encourage the citizen's participation for furnishing the information and dialogue between citizens and administration by adopting following means.

- By inviting the comments of citizens' for decision making on public policies;
- By conducting surveys for considering the preferences of stake holders regarding the social welfare programmes and projects.
- Proper involvement of citizen's in evaluating and monitoring the performance of public service delivery process in their area.
- Report cards or scorecards can be prepared about the administrative performance and the results may be made available to the public through electronic media.
- Consultative mechanisms can provide inputs to policy development. For this purpose official hours can be fixed for consultation of media and interested public on general matters.
- Face to face interaction can be organized with the affected citizens and the responsible officials.
- Citizen's involvement in the planning and budgetary process may be fruitful for proper implementation of programmes and schemes.
- Group discussions can be organized through discussion forums regarding involvement of potential stakeholders in order to receive the public opinion or perception.
- Seminars/conferences/workshops can be organized for proper involvement of citizens in governance process. Information technology and e-governance process can be helpful in establishing a two-way communication between administration and citizens.

Strengthening the Openness Capacity of Public Administration

A culture of openness does not emerge on its own. It depends on dedication to work in terms of training, campaigning, practice, networking and other factors responsible for bringing the culture in all aspects of the administrative activities. However, prior to internal training efforts, public administration as a discipline should make a part of recruitment policy so that the new staff can get basic knowledge about administrative process, qualities of good administration and the principle of maximum openness through their educational background. The following measures can be considered as capacity building means.

a) Training

In order to start the process of openness in the administration, it is necessary to strengthen the knowledge and qualifications of the public officials. This requires training, its practice and healthy cooperation among the administrative hierarchy. Training of the administration cannot be carried forward in isolation. It is particularly important to provide specific training to the official who is engaged in access to information. Training plays a crucial role in the introduction of a legitimate openness process. There is a need to institutionalize the training programmes in regularized way to train the administrative officials regarding information dissemination as per the RTI Act, 2005 provisions. These institutes may develop positive partnerships with civil society organizations that have the advantage of being customers of public administration. In Great Britain when the freedom of information Act enforced on 1st January, 2005 it was necessary to conduct extensive training sessions with all branches of public administration to introduce the principles of the new legislation. A training manual for public officials can be published for application of freedom of information practice.

b) Networking

Networking is the most important means of strengthening the capacity of public administration for providing information. Participation in regular meetings with equals from other parts of the administration facilitates discussion of successes and dilemmas in a non-binding manner.

c) Accountability about the Lack of Openness

In order to ensure a culture of openness and to help citizens access to information, some complaints and appeal mechanisms must be in place for redressing the grievances. The administrative system should have legal openness system and accountability should be fixed for refusal and delay in delivery of information. For this purpose the internal review of the administrative system must be independent and under the control of superior of dealing hand. The administrative complaints system should include independent bodies like ombudsman institutions, information commissioners and data protection agencies. Such bodies may be established to act as watchdog for violation of openness principles by public officials.

d) Management Information System

Information is knowledge derived from data that is placed within a context. It is message, something to be communicated from the sender to the receiver. Management Information System is designed by an organization to collect and report

information on a programme and which allows the administrator to plan, monitor and evaluate the operations and the performance of the whole programme. Management information system involves the physical equipment, relevant instructions, procedures, database and participation of administrative officers. Once the information successfully managed then it can be used for the longer period for the purpose of openness.

e) Foster Teamwork

Cooperation and Coordination in information sharing is the base for success of any organization. These processes develop teamwork among the employees of one organization or other and motivate them to share ideas freely and positively. Such information sharing processes influence the administrative culture for dissemination of information to the public.

f) Reward and Incentive Management

Reward and incentives are important to motivate employees towards excellence in service delivery. These may be material and non-material benefits given to employees in addition to their normal salaries to induce them to go that extra mile towards promoting efficiency and effectiveness for openness of information in the job.

g) Development of Work Ethics

An important dimension of ethics in public administration is work ethics. It represents a commitment to the fulfillment of one's official responsibilities with a spirit of dedication, involvement and sincerity. It also implies that an employee would love his work and not treat it as a burden or a load. Some specific norms of productivity and work performance may be prescribed for developing the work ethics in organizations and individuals. A comprehensive and inclusive performance appraisal system should be adopted.

Concluding Remarks

Public administration is situated in the core of any democratic functioning because the major political decisions and issues have been executed and managed by administrative officers. Administration does not become open and transparent out of the blue. It takes time to sow the seed of openness and make it grow into a culture of openness within the institutions. Old habits and perceptions of administrative officers need to change as well as the citizens must be invited to participate in and influence the conduct of public affairs for ethical governance. Leadership must openly support the proper implementation of RTI Act for openness and simplification of governance procedure. Citizen should regard the legislative and administrative practices of openness of information; it means they should care for their duties with the right of getting information. Clear guidelines should be adopted on how to be open and accommodate information requests. Incentive mechanisms should be established to reward efficient information providing officials. The organizational structure should reflect and support the adherence to the openness principles. It should be clear to the public where to address information requests.

However, a set of core preconditions must also be fulfilled in order to open up and able to provide access to information for administrative employees. This applies to the external as well as internal levels. Externally, it takes a huge institutional landscape to promote the development of an open public administration. Such a landscape comprises the separation of powers, respect for the rule of law and protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. It moreover requires the existence of free and active media and NGOs as well as active citizens wishing to be informed about matters of public affairs.

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