

Vertical Silos and Governance Deficit

One of the key challenges of public management in India is the absence of horizontal linkages and coordination. As a result, the right hand does not seem to know what the left hand does. What is the evidence?

There are reported to be as many as over seventy Groups of Ministers (GOMs) appointed by the Prime Minister ever since the UPA government came to office. Some of them are presumably needed to reconcile conflicting interests and accommodate all the key stakeholders in government before finalizing a policy. Given the coalition compulsions one could argue that forums for collective decision making would be of value in building consensus within government and among alliance partners. But several of the committees and GOMs are standing testimonies to lack of horizontal coordination.

The way watershed development and soil conservation are handled by Government of India is a good example of failure of coordination. At least three Ministers – Agriculture, Rural Development, and Water Resource Management – and Planning Commission have a say in the matter. Each has its own policies and budgets, and there does not seem to be a coherent approach. Any effort to integrate the programmes seems to be resisted by all!

The story of rural health mission is similar. At one stage, several agencies were dealing with it, often in isolation. The National Advisory Council, Prime Minister's office, Health Ministry and Planning Commission were all involved, and often it seemed that no body knew what exactly was happening! The mistakes committed in early stages on account of isolated functioning took a long time to be rectified.

Perhaps energy sector is the worst of all. Ministries of Petroleum, coal, power, non-conventional energy and even Agriculture (biofuels) and wasteland management are involved in managing energy sector. The result is unsurprising. India does not seem to have a coherent energy strategy, nor do we think in terms of the long-term future when depleting oil resources and growing global warming concerns make a holistic approach to energy needs a critical imperative. Even the report of an expert team appointed by Planning Commission on biofuels did not spur the many ministries and agencies into coherent action.

For years, there have been efforts to improve the quality of voter registration in the country. Repeated studies revealed a disturbingly high level of errors. A simple, VOTEINDIA

effective answer lies in creating a permanent, citizen-friendly access to voter rolls and transparent registration mechanism at the door-step. We have an impressive postal infrastructure, with about 155,000 delivery post offices. A post office is possibly the most citizen-friendly, accessible public office in India. If only voter registration is available round the year through post offices, with adequate safeguards like transparency and appeal provisions, the voter rolls can be cleaned up with citizen-involvement and media exposure. This simple solution, or some other accessible, transparent process, could not be implemented for over seven years now because the agencies involved – Election Commission, Postal Department and Law Ministry – could not yet find time or inclination to act in concert!

The case of ICDS scheme expansion is illustrative of this silo mentality of government. Amazingly, even after Parliament's approval and strong political commitment, actual implementation still needs the clearance of bureaucratic hurdles. And the states are not even formally notified once budget is approved. As a result, until the actual allocations are made, states do not even begin the preparatory work.

In some ways, states are slightly better at horizontal linkages. And this is not because of systemic improvements, but is largely due to highly centralized, feudal, chief minister driven administration in most states!

Clearly there is great need for improving governmental efficiency at both the policy making and implementation levels. Multiplicity of agencies and diffusion of responsibility at the top, and over-centralization and absence of accountability at the bottom have become the banes of our administration. The result is a system of alibis in which no one is at fault, and collectively the government underperforms.

Two examples of significant coordination and efficiency gains come from Singapore and Australia. The remarkable degree of horizontal coordination and sense of purpose exhibited by the state agencies in Singapore are refreshing. Skeptics quickly point out that Singapore is a city-state, and they don't have some of the political freedoms we enjoy. Both arguments are true, but we cannot forever use democracy as an alibi for our failings. Much of what well-functioning states accomplished is not because of autocratic rulers, but because systems have been designed to deliver. For instance, in Singapore, the senior minister in charge of a

subject acts as the junior minister in another ministry. The idea is to familiarize ministers with other subjects as well as develop better coordination. Rank and VOTEINDIA

hierarchies give way to expertise and coordination. The Council on the Cost and Quality of Government in New South Wales (Australia) is another example of innovation improving efficacy in government. Directly under the premier, the Council reviews the functioning of government agencies, rates performance, measures corporate overheads, conducts staff climate surveys, and in general improves performance. The accent is on results and outcomes, not an alibi for inaction and defensive parleys to avoid trouble.

It is time we restructured government ministries and departments, and evolved mechanisms of convergence, monitoring and measurement of outcomes. Otherwise, policy paralysis, delays and tardy delivery will continue. A robust private sector needs to be backed by competent public management in order to accelerate growth, provide services, and help the poor to fulfill their potential. Or else, the bulk of the people will continue to be on the margins of society and economy, causing avoidable suffering and undermining peace and growth.

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