

Public Administration as an Instrument of Information and Openness: Paradigm Shift for Efficient Governance

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Abstract – Government and society cannot promote and enforce ethical behavior solely through the utilization of ethical codes of conduct or through the promulgation of a plethora of legislation. Communities tend to equate moral values and moral norms with values and norms, which apply only to personal relations. Aristotle contended that humans are not inherently virtuous and that ethics must be taught and practiced. Public officials should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest demands it. So, the administrative openness and simplification may be considered as a paradigm shift for ethical governance in any country of this world. The freedom or right to information can be an instrument for making the administrative activities and processes open and simple for the citizens. This paper makes an effort to justify the title of the paper by highlighting structural dimension of information management system, medium of disseminating the information.

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INTRODUCTION

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 institution. The issue of Right to Information has gained considerable importance because it is the key to strengthening participatory democracy and ushering in people centred governance. Access to information can empower the poor and they can get information about public policies and actions, which are launching for their welfare. 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 good 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 agent regarding information provider.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) has published a set of principles, the public's right to know: Principles on Freedom of Information Legislation, setting out best practice standards on freedom of information legislation. These principles are based on international and regional law and standards, evolving state practice and the general principles of law recognized by the community of nations.

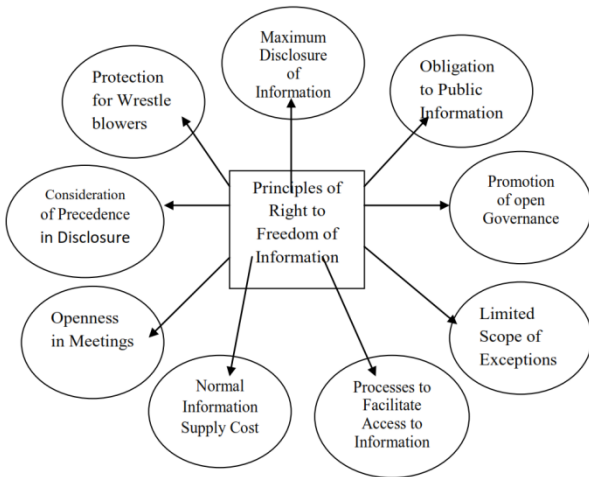


Figure – 1

Source: www.article19.org/docimages/512.htm.

MEANING OF OPENNESS

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. Willingness often develops through outside pressure, i.e. from NGOs, pressure groups and the political opposition. Such involvement of the citizens is an active way to : Increase commitment and co-ownership; diminish the “us-them” thinking; tap available resources in civil society; turn negative feelings (protests) into positive energies (engagement) – enthusiasm and involvement of citizens; give the administration an opportunity to make better decisions and solutions to problems; create a balance between different special interest groups thus increasing local democracy; and reconcile people’s reality on the ground with what is claimed on paper through public service reports on progress of government in delivering services. The figure below illustrates what public administration should be particularly aware of in order to secure openness and the involvement of citizens in public affairs

ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE FOR OPENNESS

Administrative procedures are instruments of governance, which can be used to define specific tasks. Through the establishing and applying the administrative procedures, a greater level of transparency, efficiency and coherence may be achieved. The proper procedure for providing open access to information and responsible administration maintains the disclosure of : (i) internal information like routine working procedure and background information of the staff as per staff handbook

containing information on procedures and processes; (ii) procedure of the preparation and publication of budgets and annual accounts; (iii) procedure for registering and storing information; (iv) procedure to accommodate public enquires and requests about access to information; (v) procedure for publication and release of information and make information intelligible, accessible and useful. (vi) procedure for openness of meetings and possible direct involvement of the public through internet hearings, (vii) Communication policy (viii) Procedure for Public consultation; (ix) Procedure on e-governance.

STRUCTURAL DIMENSION OF INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Structural Management is the central part of any organization for proper functioning. Public administration is the instrument for providing the desired information in the present era of globalization privatization and liberalization. So, these are the main components for structural management regarding providing the services and information to citizens through public administration.

a. Archives and Registers

Archives and registers are the best possible means for securing and systematic arrangement of data. According to need and size, archives and databases may be organized properly or in a decentralized manner within every single branch of the administration.

b. Information Office

Presently in India the task of providing information is attached as an additional charge with the existing offices and the concerned office feels extra burden. So, for redressing the feeling of the extra burden, a separate unit/office may be started with efficient and separate staff. Often information offices or units are assigned responsibility for general communication and information activities to serve the public, such offices may be helpful in identifying the topics of public interest for effective communication strategy and practice through public opinion, examination of requests from the general public, public hearings and pools. It may be advantageous to have several specific information departments or information officers as an expert body for answering different types of requests. Information offices may be closely linked to the experts and library of the institution for proper knowledge management. The profile of information officer should include the skills like communication skills, service skills, organization skills, language skills etc. for proper information providing process.

c. Access to Information Services

In many countries the task of providing information is assigned to public relation officers to information desks or one-stop shops. 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. In India the Vijaywada Online Information Centre (VOICE) delivers municipal services like building approvals and birth/death certificates etc. It also handles the collection of property, water and sewerage taxes. The VOICE system uses five kiosks located close to the citizens. This practice has reduced corruption, made access to information and service more convenient, and improved the finances of the municipal government. 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 an easy accessible or local language. Otherwise they will face the problem in assisting the citizens for their information requests.

d. Digitalize the Services

Digitalization of administration is the core area of service delivery in the liberalized, privatized and globalized world. It 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.

MEDIUM OF DISSEMINATING THE INFORMATION:-

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. Section 4 of the Right to Information Act, 2005 of India makes a provision for mandatory maintenance and computerization of records as well as disclosure of information suo motu by public authorities on a proactive basis for transparent governance.

Printed Information

The printed information may be kept in public domain through the brochures or booklets, newsletters, reports, analysis and contributions to debates in printed media

Radio and TV

Audio visual media is effective instrument to provide information for common public. The radio has the advantage of cheapness as well as it can be used to provide information to all groups of society, including the illiterate part of the population. Moreover, it is effective instrument to reach remote areas of the country.

PRINT MEDIA

Information and Communication Technologies

Modern information and communication technologies (ICT) give an opportunity to public administration about publishing reports, policies, and guidelines through on-line self-service. The internet is frequently used by public administration around the world as a way to inform citizens about public affairs. The advantage of the Internet has its ability to process huge amount of information in a speedy and systematic manner, it is easy to update and it can combine different types of information such as text, pictures, sound and film. At the 9th International Anti-Corruption Conference held by the World Bank in South Africa in 1999 this system was recognized as a "Good Practice" in terms of using public awareness to combat corruption.

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. The areas of comparative information may cover: living conditions and employment public, income and expenditures, services sector, child and social care in general, education and culture, costs and benefits etc.

Campaigns

Campaigning is a useful tool for sensitizing entire populations regarding general public matters as well as public awareness about the right to information.

General Awareness

In addition to information provided by public administration, general education can be used as a medium of imparting information and administration should involve the adults in the process and

enhance their knowledge about information management regarding public affairs system. In Denmark the state administration provides financial support to all kinds of general education activities undertaken by a number of state and private schools, universities as well as private organizations according to the law on general education.

Activate the Request Forms

Public administration should guide the citizen by designing or publishing in the request forms. These forms should highlight the correct information request procedure. It can avoid the unnecessary harassment, of public as well as saves the time of administration.

Citizen Participation in Decision Process

The objectives of providing public information to citizen are to increase their interest and participation in the working of public administration. Through this involvement citizen by creating channels for dialogue, there is a possibility of active participation actively in the decision making and finalization of priority list of services. Moreover, public administration can receive valuable information about citizens' preferences about the public delivery system and this enable 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 cost-effective.

However, in order to get the positive effects of citizens' participation, it is important that they feel their real involvement. Public administration can use some techniques to encourage the citizen's involvement for furnishing the information and dialogue between citizens and the administration. Some of them may be as follows:

- Inviting the comments of citizens' for decision making on public policies;
- By Conducting survey 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 administration of their area.
- Report cards or scorecards can be prepared about the administrative performance can be prepared and the results may be made available to the public.
- Consultative mechanisms can provide inputs to policy development. For this purpose regular official hours of consultation for media and interested public on general matters can be fixed.

- Face to face interaction can be conducted with the affected citizens and the responsible official for particular function.
- Proper citizen's involvement in the planning and budgeting process of the particular local area may be fruitful for proper Implementation of programmes and schemes.
- Discussion forums for the involvement of potential stakeholders can be organized in order to identify the public opinion or perception.
- Seminars/Conference/Workshops can be organized for proper information about rural development programmes. Information technology and e-governance process can be helpful in establishing a two-way communication process between administration and citizens.

Encourage the officials engaged in providing efficient, complete, timely and relevant information must be recognized and rewarded.

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 to bring the culture into all aspects of the administration. However, prior to internal training efforts, public administration as a discipline should make a part of recruitment policy so that new staff can get basic knowledge about good administration and the principle of maximum openness through their educational background.

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 viewed in isolation. It is particularly important to provide special training to the official who is working directly linked with access to information.

Training plays a crucial role in the introduction of a legal openness regime. Some specific institutes should be established for in service training for all branches of the administration. 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 as a resource for them may be published for application of freedom of information practice. The manual may be designed in such a way that it can be useful for trainers equipped with learning tool for public officials and a reference tool for those having participated in courses.

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.

ACCOUNTABILITY ABOUT THE LACK OF OPENNESS

In order to ensure a culture of openness and to help citizens access to information, a certain number of complaint and appeal mechanisms must be in place. The administrative system should have legal openness system and provided for appeal to the complaints about refusal and delay in delivery of information. The internal review of the administrative system must be independent and made by superior official than the person who deals with the original request. The administrative complaints system should include independent bodies, such as ombudsman institutions, information commissioners and data protection agencies. Such bodies are established to act as watchdog for violation of human rights by public officials. They provide access to rapid and cost – effective review about the decisions of public administration. In relation to reviews, such bodies should have the power to get information held by public administration.

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.

Foster Teamwork: - Cooperation and Coordination 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.

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 in the job.

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.

SUGGESTIONS

- Leadership must openly support the implementation of RTI for openness and good governance.
- Internal guidelines should be adopted on how to be open and accommodate information requests.
- Incentive mechanisms should be established to reward good information practices.
- The organizational structure should reflect and support the adherence to the openness principle.
- It should be clear to the public where to address information requests.
- The administration should provide a wide scope of information at its own initiative.
- The public should be empowered to participate in the conduct of public affairs.
- The administration should use training, networking and other available methods to strengthen their capacity to be open.

CONCLUSION

Public administration is situated in the core of any democracy because the major political decisions and issues are executed and managed by them. 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.

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. And finally it takes legislation and principles of freedom of information to create a truly open public administration.

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