Accountability and the new media: Use of ICTs in Governance in India

Sriharini Narayanan*

Abstract— Citizens across the world are constantly innovating new mechanisms of holding their governments accountable for their actions. One such mechanism that is gaining popularity in developing countries is E-governance. Using two case studies of Online Public Grievance Redressal Mechanism (OPGRM), namely Online Complaint Management System (OCMS) in the city of Mumbai and eGovernments Foundation's Public Grievance Redressal mechanism (eGov-PGR) operational in the city of Bangalore, this paper seeks answer to the questions – can accountability be mainstreamed in e-governance initiatives? Can citizens use e-governance initiatives to hold government officials accountable? An extensive review of literature including evaluation reports, official documents, WebPages, and news reports were undertaken in order to situate each of these cases in relation to the theoretical framework. Interview with government officials using this system were also interviewed. This paper concludes that there are definite improvements in the answerability element of accountability such as time-bound redressal of complaints, better internal accountability through automatic escalation, clear performance standards and easier access to information. However, enforcement aspect of accountability is very much lacking due to the absence of a performance or incentive based system of these bureaucracies and insufficient monitoring by other accounting agencies. For policy makers and systems architects, this paper recommends the strengthening of horizontal accountability mechanisms, increase in transparency of complaint related information to general public and aligning e-governance with larger public management reforms as key factors that could improve the use of e-governance to strengthen accountability relationship between citizens and the public service providers.

Index Terms— Accountability, e-governance, governance, online grievance redressal mechanisms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Democracy is faced by a paradox of triumph and deficit where on one hand the number of countries adopting democracy is on the rise while the quality of democracy in some of the mature democracies around the world is on the decline (Gaventa 2006:8, Skocpol 2003:11, Dahl 2000:2). The lingering maladies of corruption, clientelism, partimonialism and arbitrary exercise of power, point to the weakness of the rule of law and public accountability (Schedler 1999: 1). As a result there is a growing emphasis on restraining the power of public agencies by subjecting them to scrutiny not only by citizen but also other public agencies. While elections remain

* The author is a development professional with specific focus on governance in India. This paper was prepared while the author was pursuing a MA in Governance and Development at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex (2008-2009). Author may be contacted at S.Narayanan@alumni.ids.ac.uk

one of the conventional methods of demanding accountability, new forms or mechanisms of engagement are emerging (Goetz and Jenkins 2005). Some of these mechanisms rely on traditional methods of human interaction while some others are built using technology. E-governance is one such mechanism, built on a technology platform that has significantly changed the nature of relationship between citizens and governments.

Over the last decade there has been a proliferation of e-governance initiatives in India which became instantly popular with individuals as well as private companies. With the growth in Information Communication Technology (ICT) governments soon realised the potential of using technology to deliver information and services to people.

However use of the term governance in e-governance suggests that there is more to it than just efficiency and process re-engineering. E-governance claims to offer stronger bonds between public servants and citizens based on transparency and accountability (Schware 2000; Heeks 2001a in Haque 2002). If this potential exists, is it being realised by both the government and its citizens to overcome some of the long standing democratic deficits such as lack of responsiveness, corruption, absence of accountability, etc? While the literature on accountability in India is very vast, unfortunately the potential of e-governance in demanding accountability in India is an under-studied area. Presently available literature on e-governance focus mainly on the benefits of e-governance in improving efficiency and effectiveness of government functions in addition to a few incidental benefits such as transparency and reduced corruption (Bhatnagar 2003).

Therefore the central question of this paper is can e-governance be used as a tool to strengthen accountability between the citizens and public officials in service delivery in India? I examine the answers to this question by specifically studying the use of two online public grievance mechanisms (OPGRM) used by citizens to interact with their service providers. A first of its kind, the Online Complaint Management System (OCMS) was an innovative initiative piloted in the city of Mumbai, India as a result of collaboration between the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (BMC) and Praja, an NGO dedicated to re-establishing accountability and transparency in governance (www.praja.org). Following the model of OCMS, eGovernment Foundation, a non-profit organisation in Bangalore, India established amongst other e-governance applications, e-Gov Public Grievance Redressal (e-Gov PGR) in collaboration with the Government of Karnataka. Though

there are similar initiatives in other cities of India, not to mention some recently launched initiatives by the Government of India, these two OPGRM are by far the best organised. The fact that OCMS was taken over entirely by the BMC and since 2007 runs as a system offered by the Municipal Corporation for its citizens shows the usefulness and popularity of the online mechanisms to strengthen accountability.

Both the above OPGRM provides a channel for citizens to complain about the service, provide feedback regarding the service and also demand information/justification about the quality of service rendered. Unlike some of the e-governance projects in operation which only provide data/documents, the OPGRM allows for interaction as well as seeks information from the citizens. This paper will focus on the features of two specific OPGRMs and assess:

- The extent to which citizens can hold their public officials accountable for the services rendered through online mechanisms.
  - What are the advantages the online system offers over other existing accountability mechanisms?
  - Where are the gaps?, and
  - How can we improve the potential of these mechanisms?

This section provides further background and has been divided into three sub-parts (i) Definition of e-governance, (ii) e-governance in India and (iii) the expectations and promises of e-governance initiatives.

Section 2 lays out the key definitions and the conceptual/theoretical framework of this paper which draws on Schedler's description of accountability as a two-dimensional concept consisting of answerability and enforcement. Section 3 provides a detailed description of the two case studies and proceeds to analyse them within the accountability framework described in the previous chapter. Section 4 concludes and offers recommendations on what can be done to enhance the OPGRM channels to demand accountability through the use of e-governance.

1.1 Definitions

What is e-governance? Since usage of the term e-governance is of recent origin, there seems to be no commonly accepted definition (Bhatnagar 2004:19). According to Heeks (2001: 2) e-governance should be seen to include all ICTs in order to forge connections (i) within government agencies (ii) between the government and citizens/NGOs (iii) government and business and (iv) within and between NGOs. The Council of Europe defines e-governance as, "the use of electronic technologies in three areas of public action: relations between the public authorities and civil society, functioning of the public authorities at all stages of the democratic process and the provision of public services"[1]. Backus (2001:1) defines e-governance as the application of electronic means in the interaction between government and business, government and citizens and in the internal government operations to simplify and improve democratic, government, and business aspects of governance. Singh (2008:5) believes that the specific contexts and objectives of the governance domain determine the meaning and purpose of e-governance.

Therefore, drawing from all the above definitions, for the purpose of this paper, e-governance is defined as the use of ICT applications in the interaction between government and citizens (G2C), government and businesses (G2B) and between government agencies (G2G) in order to improve the functioning of public authorities and public service. Clearly the scope of e-governance is quite vast as it attempts to use technology to re-engineer government processes to suit the needs of all the different stakeholders of government services. This paper limits itself to studying the use of e-governance between government and citizens (G2C).

1.2 E-governance in India

There were several factors that catalysed the use of ICT by government agencies in India. Emergence of India as one of the leaders in Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the late 80s coupled with the incremental benefits of computerisation and automation of routine processes provided the right impetus to adopt the use of ICT in public management reforms. Bhatnagar (2009) states that though many developing country governments like India have been using ICT for a few decades, the initial uses of technology were for automation of internal processes and building of management information systems. The shift to use of ICT for the external workings i.e processing and communicating data in order to offer a variety of services that bring citizens and governments closer (Heeks 2001:2), has been quite recent. One clear sign that conveys India's commitment towards e-governance is the National E-governance Plan (NeGP) launched in 2006 with an outlay of Rs.12,000 Crores (1 Crore = 10 Million) that aims to make all government services accessible to the common citizen and ensure efficiency, transparency and reliability at affordable cost (Ministry of Information Technology, GoI).

1.3 What does e-governance offer? – Expectations and Promises

The growing popularity of e-governance, according to the cyber optimists (Norris 2001:112) could be attributed to the new ways it offers to improve government processes, connect different stakeholders, allow ordinary citizens to participate in decision-making and the change potential for good governance. Few immediate benefits from automation of government processes are efficiency and effectiveness gains i.e. cheaper transaction costs, increase in productivity and faster service. However many proponents of e-governance claim that in addition to an improvement in efficiency, e-governance holds the potential to expand citizens' access to information, reinforce innovation in public agencies, reduce arbitrary action and discretion, increase transparency and enhance accountability (Haque 2002, Druke 2007, Heeks 2001, Bhatnagar 2003, 2004, 2009, Norris 2001).

---

[1] http://www.coe.int/T/E/com/files/themes/e-voting/definition.asp

Perusal of various e-governance projects currently operational in India shows that some of these claims are indeed justified. A few successful e-governance initiatives include Bhoomi Project in Karnataka, E-seva in Hyderabad, FRIENDS in Kerala, E-procurement in Andhra Pradesh and e-filing of income tax.

The important question to ask is how are these e-governance efforts contributing to improvements in overall governance? How do they help in addressing some of the democratic deficits of lack of responsiveness and accountability? This paper contends that apart from OPGRM, the vast majority of e-governance initiatives do not address the critical aspect of accountability in governance. Perhaps one could argue that there are cumulative benefits in the overall performance of government agencies and that automation lessens the room for ambiguity, discretion and arbitrary action (Bhatnagar 2003:2, Druke 2007: 63) which could possibly lead to a reduction in corruption, improve transparency and thereby lead to accountability. But can accountability be mainstreamed in e-governance? Can citizens use e-governance initiatives to go one step further and hold government officials accountable and demand better service delivery? The rest of this paper seeks to answer this question. In the following section I define the term accountability and propose a theoretical framework which will be used to analyse the case study.

II. ACCOUNTABILITY LITERATURE: SCOPE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the perennial concerns that have worried the minds of ancient philosophers and present day political thinkers/activists alike is power: ways to control it prevent its abuse and subject it to certain procedures and rules of conduct (Schedler, 1999:2). An issue that citizens in many democracies seem to be grappling with is the absence or weakness of institutional mechanisms to restrain the power of the state. In other words accountability has come to be recognized as a key attribute of both democracy and democratic quality, as well as an essential ingredient in democracy's long-term viability.

According to Peruzzotti and Smulovitz (2006: 5) a key element that distinguishes liberal representative democracies from other types of regimes is the existence of an institutional framework comprising of agents of authorized political power that is oriented to ensuring responsiveness and accountability of these authorized agents. Whilst many regard accountability as the corner stone of modern democracy, the obvious lack of it has often been the critique of democracy (Goetz and Jenkins 2005, Schedler 1999).

This section describes a theoretical framework used to understand accountability. The first section brings out briefly the discourse on accountability in the specific context of public service delivery. Section two describes the main theoretical framework using Schedler's (1999) discourse on accountability consisting of two concepts i.e. answerabilty and enforcement. Section three will briefly outline how the framework will be used to analyse the two case studies.

2.1 Accountability: Definitions

The centrality of accountability in democratic governance is without doubt pivotal. Simple as it may seem, defining accountability has been a difficult task. According to Schedler (1999:13), "accountability represents an under explored concept whose meaning remains evasive, whose boundaries are fuzzy, and whose internal structure is confusing". Agreeing with Schedler, Fox (2007:27) notes that accountability is an under specified concept and we can recognize it when we see it.

However, Goetz and Jenkins (2005:3) offer the following set of questions that are helpful to define and understand accountability.
- Who is seeking accountability?
- From Whom?
- Where (which forum)?
- How is the powerful being held to account? and,
- For what (which actions and against which norms) is accountability being demanded?

The first two questions help in identifying the actors in the accountability relationship as well as the power equation between the actors. The third question indicates the forum or the boundary (including geographical coverage) within which accountability is demanded. Fourth question pertains to the means or mechanisms used to demand accountability while the fifth question focuses on the changing norms against which power holders are held to account. In short, these questions help understand the inter-play between the actors, institutional structures, and mechanisms of accountability.

Whatever may be the context, accountability involves "delegation of power by many to a few in the interest of governability" (Goetz and Jenkins 2005:1). It is about preventing the abuse of power that has been delegated, subjecting power holders to inform and justify their actions and impose sanctions in the event of oversight.

Schedler (1999:17) offers a much simpler definition of accountability "where A is accountable to B when A is obliged to inform B about A's (past or future) actions and decisions, to justify them, and to suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct".

Although accountability can be demanded of anyone in any context, this paper uses the term accountability within the boundaries of the government and citizen. Barker (in Goetz and Jenkins 2005: 11) defines governmental accountability as "the duty of the public official to report their actions to citizens, and the right of citizens to take action against those officials whose conduct they consider unsatisfactory".

According to the WDR 2004, citizens have two routes through which they can improve public services. One is the long route where citizens/clients represent their grievance regarding poor performance to the policy-makers who in turn convey these concerns to the service provider (which could be a government enterprise) to effect an improvement in service delivery.

The second route is direct interaction between the citizens and the service providers. The WDR (2004: 9) argues that by providing clients with more choice and participation, service providers may be either willing or forced to improve services. Strengthening citizens'/client's ability to monitor and discipline the provider's performance can lead to service delivery improvements. Wallack (2007: 2) in her study on user feedback on public services in cities in Karnataka, India, emphasizes user or client feedback as a potentially powerful tool to enable effective citizen voice and creating greater accountability for city and city workers' performance. The OPGRM performs this precise function of facilitating smoother interaction between the service providers and the citizens. Brinkerhoff (2001:6) calls this performance accountability – 'the scrutiny of the actions of officials and agencies related to the production of outputs, delivery of services, accomplishment of objectives, and/or achievement of results and impacts'.

Apart from the public who can monitor and discipline, public service providers in many democratic countries are subject to scrutiny and enforcement by other powerful state actors such as auditor-generals, judiciary, ombudsman, regulators and so on. O'Donnell (1999:38) uses the term horizontal accountability to:

describe the existence of state agencies that are legally enabled and empowered and factually willing and able, to take actions that span from routine oversight to criminal sanctions or impeachment in relation to actions or omission by other agents or agencies of the state that may be qualified as unlawful. "

Post-liberalisation, in India, several sectors were opened up for private sector participation. The increase in number of service providers necessitated the creation of independent regulators who monitor the performance of the various providers, set standards of performance, settled disputes etc. Though the OPGRM does not provide a channel to these independent regulators, this paper will elaborate on the larger benefits of tightening the horizontal accountability mechanisms towards the goals of accountability in service delivery. Interestingly, the United Nations e-Government Survey 2008, points out the need for a shift from e-governance to connected or networked governance which envisages governmental collective action to advance the public good by engaging the creative efforts of all segments of society. It is about improved cooperation between government agencies, influencing the strategic actions of other stakeholders, allowing for an enhanced, active and effective consultation and engagement with citizens.

In the next sub-section I describe in detail the main theoretical framework of accountability that will be used to analyse the case studies.

2.2 Two dimensions of Accountability: Theoretical Framework

From the above discussion it is clear that accountability is a very broad concept. Though it might seem simple, operationalising accountability is a tough proposition since it means making the power holders answerable for their actions. But accountability is not only about demanding answers or explanations. What happens as a result of knowing the answer i.e. the outcome is equally important to make accountability more meaningful.

Schedler (1999:14) highlights two main aspects of accountability namely: Answerability and Enforcement. In order to realize accountability, both aspects of answerability and enforcement are stressed as being equally important and necessary.

Answerability is often times used as a synonym to accountability. However, it is only a part of accountability and represents the obligation of public officials and agencies to provide information about their actions and decisions and to justify them to the public and to specialised accounting bodies with the authority to monitor their conduct (Schedler 1999:14). Answerability can be further broken down into two sub-parts: information and justification. By demanding answerability, we demand information about certain actions and also expect a justification for those actions. Although it is not necessary that both need to be demanded at the same time, information and justification go hand in hand in democratic accountability. Availability of information precedes the demand for justification. In many countries, access to information is the first hurdle in demanding accountability as holding and hoarding of information gives a sense of power and also offers protection from official oversight.

Enforcement on the other hand is taking accountability to the next level where power holders are punished for oversight or abuse of power. Enforcement is the capacity of an accounting party to impose sanctions on the accountable party in case of manifest misconduct in office (Goetz and Jenkins 2005:9). The capacity to punish forms an integral part of accountability. Schedler (1999:17) believes that unless there is some punishment for demonstrated abuses of authority, there is no accountability or the institutional mechanisms may be considered weak. A system that is responsive and provides reasons may not be sufficiently accountable if it does not sanction deviations from rules and procedures. Nevertheless, many equate accountability with answerability and consider sanctions to be dispensable. It is plausible that accountability can be achieved through either answerability or sanction; however Goetz and Jenkins (2005: 9) argues that the outcome or judgment from such a system can be questioned. Both answerability and enforcement are integral to accountability but neither is sufficient.

However, Schedler's description of sanctions is rather incomplete and does not elaborate on the practical difficulties in imposing sanctions. While accountability is itself a struggle

for power and sanctioning public oversight is critical in controlling the abuse of power, one needs to recognize the challenges in operationalising sanctions. Some omissions may need a simple reprimand where as others may need severe disciplinary action. Within the bureaucracy, senior officials often use their discretion to decide on the kind of sanction to be imposed on their subordinates. In some instances, even the so called watchdogs i.e. regulators, ombudsman or commission are reluctant to impose a fine on an erring official. The scenario of recovering penalties under the Right to Information Act 2005 is a case in point and shows how insolent public officials can be towards sanctions and consider themselves above the law (The Hindu, 26/09/08). It also reflects the weakness in horizontal accountability mechanisms. This also leads to the fundamental question of who watches the watchdogs and what is the punishment for not complying with a sanction.

Perhaps setting clear standards of performance may help overcome some of this ambiguity. Standards are indicative of the 'rules of the game' and reflect the expectations of both the citizens and the state as to the conduct of the state within the state-society relationship (Grant and Keohane 2005: 41). Standards answer the question "for what" is accountability demanded and the norms against which actions are measured. However, in the absence of political and administrative will, standards just remain on paper. This discussion will be elaborated further in the analysis.

Using this broad framework of accountability outlined above, this paper will examine the extent to which the elements of standards, information, justification and sanctions are addressed in the two OPGRM case studies. Due to unavailability of sufficient data on the case studies, this paper relies on secondary information, interview with complaints officials, internal reports as well as draws on personal experience as a user of these systems.

Section 3 describes the two OPGRM case studies, the context and history of these projects; the institutional arrangement and its functioning. Following this, the analysis will juxtapose the framework with the case studies to understand the extent to which such e-governance systems can foster an accountability relationship between the citizens and the state taking into account the parameters of standards, information, justification and sanction. The strengths and weaknesses of the system will be identified in order to suggest a few recommendations.

III. ONLINE PUBLIC GRIEVANCE MECHANISMS: CASE STUDY OF OCMS AND E-GOV PGR

3.1 Service delivery and emergence of OPGRM in India.

Amongst the many problems that citizens face with their governments, what affects them most on a day-to-day basis is service delivery. While the market can deliver some of the functions and services being provided by governments, in many developing countries basic services continue to be the responsibility of governments, the effective and efficient performance of which will require increased attention to accountability (Paul 1994:2).

In 1993, Samuel Paul (1998) conducted a study amongst citizens on the performance and satisfaction of different public services offered by the government in the city of Bangalore, India that revealed the absolute lack of accountability amongst service providers. More specifically, the study showed that as many as 92 per cent of the transactions between the citizens and the public agencies were made through personal visits and two-thirds of the cases, it took more than two to three visits to solve a problem. Similarly, in Mumbai, Praja (www.praja.org), an independent voluntary organization conducted a performance survey of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) which is responsible for urban governance and delivery of civic amenities to the citizens of Mumbai (First Survey Report, Praja, 2001). This survey revealed that there were high levels of dissatisfaction amongst citizens regarding the poor response from the BMC to civic complaints and a growing apathy towards political and administrative representatives.

With the growing popularity of ICTs, technology solutions were proposed to address this problem of accountability. The concept of an online grievance mechanism became one of the e-governance initiatives to be introduced in the city of Mumbai. Known as the Online Complaint Management System (OCMS), the proponents of this project claimed it was the first of its kind anywhere in the world (www.praja.org).

3.2 OCMS and e-grievance PGRM: new mechanisms of accountability.

A. Online Complaint Management System- OCMS

The Online Complaint Management System was launched in April 2003 in 23 wards of Mumbai city following a tripartite collaboration between the BMC, Praja and Nixel Technology. Designed to integrate complaints on civic issues made through different modes of communication namely telephone, email, letters and personal visits by citizens, people from all walks of life could lodge their complaints to various agencies of the government without actually having to travel to the specific offices. The system would redirect the complaint to the appropriate ward office to resolve the complaint within a specific period of time. A unique tracking number is assigned to every complaint and the system would automatically escalate the complaint to the next higher authority if it remained unresolved for more than the promised period.

The OCMS had 91 types of complaints that covered the operations of various BMC departments including solid waste management, drainage, roads and traffic, repairs to municipal property, water supply, buildings, factories, licenses, pest control, etc. A dedicated phone line was operated for citizens

to call in with their complaints. The number 1916 was popularised through active media campaigning across the city.

Some of the offline features of the OCMS included a committee that included senior officials who met periodically to address complaints that were not solved, periodic performance reports that were sent to departmental head for review and ward level clinics that were held to publicise the OCMS.

The OCMS did not only serve the purpose of the citizens but also had a few benefits to the BMC. Some of the advantages for the administrators were the ease of use as the system collected all the data required in the prescribed format, saved time, effort and paper since the process of registering a complaint was systematised, an MIS offered a ward wise break up of reports that improved the monitoring of complaints as well as officers in-charge of handling complaints, build confidence amongst citizens through transparency and lastly the system offered a snapshot of the BMC's overall performance which could be used by the departments to plan future improvements.

Unfortunately, the OCMS had its defects too. The undated World Bank WSP evaluation report of OCMS points out to certain shortcoming of the system. Citizens were dissatisfied with redressal and there seemed to be discrepancies in the number of complain solved. While citizens claimed 51% unresolved complaints, the BMC claimed only 12%. Leakages of complaints were noticed i.e. complaints that were not entered into the OCMS but were routed through political representatives. Some of these complaints were given special treatment because of political clout and were prioritised over the OCMS complaints. Awareness about the OCMS was quite uneven across the city which affected usage considerably. Geographical locations with middle income populations seemed to use the system more than the poorer sections even though complaints could be registered through any method and did not need access to a computer.

Since the advantages outweighed the shortcomings, the BMC decided to develop its own OCMS software using the SAP program which it launched in February 2007 (interview with complaints officer, central zone, BMC, July 29th 2010).

B. E-Gov Public Grievance Redressal

Modelled on the OCMS, e-Gov PGR (Public Grievance Redressal) is an application built by the eGovernments foundation (www.egovernments.org); a non profit trust established in 2003 with the primary aim of improving governance in India by fostering accountability and transparency through the effective use of eGovernance software system in Corporations and Municipalities all across India.

E-Gov PGR is only one part of eGovernment Foundations' ICT based governance applications which also includes 9 other applications such as accrual accounting, works management, property taxation, birth/death registration, cadastral level GIS mapping and city websites. All these applications facilitate online transaction, disclosure of data, online payment of fees and taxes.

In this paper I focus on the e-Gov PGR operations as part of their Nirmala Nagara Project implemented in 57 municipalities in the state of Karnataka. It is essentially a public-private partnership between the Government of Karnataka and eGovernments foundation. The government is the primary holder of all data while the foundation has built the application, runs it, maintains it and monitors the feedback given by citizens.

As mentioned earlier, the e-Gov PGR is very similar to the OCMS and is designed to facilitate the registration of complaints to the city government and supports back-end workflows needed to improve redressal of these complaints. The system also helps city managers and citizens track urban governments' performance in providing services that inspire few complaints and in responding quickly to complaints that do arise.

Similar to OCMS, citizens can register their complaints via the internet, phone, or by simply filling out a paper form and submitting it at one of the municipal offices. Many choose to bring their complaint to a local leader of a community group or to an elected councillor from their ward who then registers the complaint in their (the leader's) name. This feature was missing in the OCMS and was one of the main reasons for leakage of complaints. Local NGOs with a demonstrated strong presence in the city were appointed to manage the front end in order to make the e-Gov PGR more accessible and user friendly to citizens. These NGOs typically have linkages with local communities and with governments that make them trusted partners for both citizens and governments.

All complaints get recorded into the e-Gov PGR database in the same standard format and a complaint tracking number is issued to the citizen. The status of the grievance can be checked 24x7 via the internet, phone or by physically going over to a municipal grievance office/desk. The citizen can resubmit the complaint or protest if it is recorded as "redressed" while the work has not been completed on the ground.

Both the OCMS and the E-Gov PGR systems offer a single channel of communication that is not only easy to use but also reduces the transaction costs in an interactive system that provides quick feedback and provides for escalation in the event of non redressal. E-Gov PGR however has made a few improvisations on the OCMS model. On the home page of the municipality, e-Gov PGR provides a snap shot of complaints that have been registered in the entire city. It also provides a department-wise breakdown of complaints in a particular municipality and the numbers that have been solved against the total received. However, it does not specify the exact nature of complaints but provides the broad categories under which complaints have been filed.

Both the e-Gov PGR and the OCMS are e-governance

projects designed to address the issue of accountability in service delivery by strengthening the client power of citizens by providing a channel for complaints that not only demands answers but also forces the public administration to strive for better quality of service. But how do these systems ensure that both the components of answerability and sanctions are addressed?

The next sub-section analyses both these initiatives on the basis of the four elements required to achieve accountability i.e. standards, information, justification and sanctions. A few of the other challenges in implementation are also highlighted as these initiatives are not stand alone and are often enmeshed within the current political, administrative and social structures.

3.3 Locating Accountability in OPGRM

The category of OPGRMs as an e-governance initiative is rather new. There are not enough studies and reports that explore the effectiveness of such systems in strengthening accountability. Therefore, with very limited data, this paper attempts to draw a few linkages between the definitions of accountability and how far it is addressed in the two systems.

The four elements of accountability

As described above, the OPGRM is used mainly as a conduit to file complaints or questions to which the public officials are obliged to respond by either redressing the problem or by giving the appropriate explanation for non-redressal.

In both the case studies selected for this paper, there are service standards or citizens charters that spell out these terms of service that a citizen/client can expect from the service provider. The time frame within which a complaint is redressed is of critical importance to measure performance accountability and to impose sanctions. However, the criticism in both the case studies is the lack of publicity about performance standards amongst citizens which in turn weakens the ability of citizens to demand information and justification.

Information is one aspect that is sufficiently addressed in both the case studies. The wide range of categories under which citizens can file complaints reflects the diversity of the system. The ability of citizens to track the progress of their complaints is another unique feature of the two systems that also provide information on the performance of the public official. Druke (2007: 72) agrees that the ability of citizens to track their complaint is in itself a form of accountability. This feature not only breaks the opacity but re-positions the citizen as an active and vigilant participant instead of a passive recipient.

The aspect of justification seems to be inadequately addressed in both the case studies. Although both the systems allow for a two way communication between citizens and officials, it is unclear if justifications are provided. Citizens are notified if their complaint is solved or has been escalated but the reasons for escalation are not provided. However,

citizens have the option of seeking this information either through the system or by visiting the concerned office.

Coming to the most difficult aspect of accountability i.e. sanctions, both the systems use escalations as the main sanctioning tool. However, employees in public service in India are not assessed on their performance and hence escalations can merely result in a reprimand or dismissal from service for a short period of time depending on the extent of damage. Promotions and increments are almost an automatic process based on the number of years of service and other bureaucratic norms. Therefore sanctions do not pose much of a threat to many government employees. Depending on the extent of oversight and negligence of duty, senior officials use their discretion in imposing sanctions and the worst that can happen is a bad feedback on the employee's performance record which could affect their post retirement benefits. Strong unions also offer employees protection against dismissals and penalties.

In summary, while the OPGRM provides citizens with standards and information about service delivery and to some extent demand justification, it does not sufficiently address the issue of sanctions. While internal upward accountability may be enhanced, government accountability needs strengthening. However, this challenge can only be addressed through some larger systemic changes in public management reform such as an incentive based performance monitoring system for employees.

In the next part of this section, I highlight some of challenges that lie beyond the theoretical framework. Designers, system architects and e-governance implementers must keep in mind the several push and pull factors that influence the accountability relationship between the government and its citizens even while conceptualising such systems. These factors discussed below have a direct impact on efficacy of the OPGRM as an accountability tool.

A. Accountability as an individual's problem versus a collective problem

Accountability within the realm of service delivery in an ideal situation would be an individual's problem since one would expect the service provider to honour their commitment according to their standards and more importantly it is a contract where an individual pays for the services and if unhappy will have the option to change providers. But the state of service delivery in many developing countries is very different from this best case scenario. Adding to the lack of accountability is the monopoly of the state in providing some basic services like water; electricity etc coupled with the lack of choice poses a seemingly insurmountable situation where the voice of one citizen is hardly heard. Sadly, it is the lack of response, opacity of power and non-availability of redressal mechanisms that often lead to apathy and disinterest amongst citizens. I believe, the OPGRM to a large extent fosters this one to one accountability relationship and does not provide citizens of the same locality to jointly articulate their problems. Cyber pessimists (Norris 2001) believe the use of

IT in governance may disempower citizens by individualising them and eroding their common bonds (Ghere and Young 1998, Wachbroit, 2001 in Haque 2002). Due to the anonymity of complainants, citizens will not be able to collectivise. In order to do so, traditional forms of organisation and collective action would be required which bring with them their own set of problems such as who represents, which group gets priority over the other and better access to resources etc.

B. Clientelism and rent seeking behaviour

At the end of one year of OCMS operation, a decrease in the rent seeking behaviour of government officials was observed (_____WB-WSP). Similar claims have been made by Wallack and Nadhamuni (2007) study of e-Gov PGR as well. However, when complaints are not resolved for prolonged periods through the OPGRM, a citizen is forced to visit the municipal office. Depending on the desperation of the citizen and the responsiveness of the official, there is a potential risk of rent seeking relationship and corruption which subverts accountability by defeating the purpose of building an OPGRM. E-governance cannot be viewed as a substitute for personal and other kinds of traditional human interaction methods. Given the various constraints of access, affordability, language, familiarity etc, e-governance can never hope to cover every single citizen. As mentioned earlier leakages in registering complaints into the system were noticed. Even without giving these systems a chance, some citizens have the tendency to choose the "informal" route to solve their problems as it may be more expensive but faster. Therefore the efficiency of the OPGRM in addressing complaints by providing accurate information and timely justification can prevent citizens from resorting to patron-client behaviour.

C. Elite capture, urban bias and digital divide

Criticisms against e-governance and ICT based initiatives are often based on issues of access, literacy and language (digital divide); it is elitist and serves the elite even amongst urban populations. Goetz and Jenkins (2005:45- 49) argues that corruption is not the only reason why citizens, especially the poor, have failed to demand accountability from their governments. Accountability failures also stem from elite biases and elite capture which cripple the capacities of disadvantaged people to mobilise their collective voice.

The OPGRM is no exception to this allegation. Since the OPGRM work within formal state mechanisms, several problems that plague the poor are outside its ambit. The poor, especially the urban poor are not part of formal service delivery process. They often tap into these resources illegally. Hawkers, slum dwellers, and squatters cannot use the OPGRM because they are considered illegal by the state (___,WB-WSP). However, both the case studies have tried to overcome this aspect by designing a bi-lingual portal, collaborating with local NGO who work with the poor, organise awareness camps about these initiatives etc.

Paul (2003:6) however looks beyond this elite-bias allegation against e-governance and believes that the transparency and speed offered by such initiatives helps to minimise the 'cost' of transaction with the government and also makes it easier for them to deal with the government. Although there are certain conditions that are a pre-requisite for the success of ICT programs, the increase in ICT for development projects in India is a testimony to the possibilities offered by this generation of new media applications. Having worked in this sector, I tend to agree with Paul on the tremendous potential these initiatives have in holding public agencies accountable to their citizen-consumers.

D. Citizens engagement with ICT: Not an automatic process

Paul (2003:5-8) states that citizens' engagement with ICT and more specifically e-governance is not an automatic process. Sufficient publicity and information about the purpose and benefits of using the OPGRM would be mandatory for such new modes of accountability to become acceptable to citizens and public officials alike. Bhatnagar et al (2007), in their impact assessment report of e-governance projects in India claim that awareness about the system can bring users to try the online delivery once but cannot guarantee sustained use (Center for e-Governance at IIM Ahmedabad). Procedures need to be simplified to deliver concrete benefits and clear guidelines provided on online procedures to reduce users' dependence on middlemen/intermediaries (MIT GOI Impact assessment report 2008).

IV. CONCLUSION

The central question of this paper was can e-governance be used as a tool to strengthen accountability between the citizens and public officials in service delivery in India?

Two case studies: OCMS and e-Gov PGR were used to study the use of e-governance initiatives to demand accountability. Exploring this relationship between accountability and e-governance i.e. the use of OPGRM for improved service delivery has been particularly challenging for two reasons. One is the broad interpretation of the term accountability and two the lack of definitive studies on the impact and potential of e-governance on accountability.

While the two case studies are strong on elements of standard and information, there is quite a bit of room for improvement on justification and sanctions. Use of the OPGRM is also quite low compared to the total population and a lot needs to be done in the area of publicity and promotion of such initiatives. Though there is a risk of elite capture, both the case studies have innovatively addressed this problem by conducting local clinics and partnering with local NGOs to receive complaints from the uninitiated.

It is evident that e-governance holds immense potential to improve accountability in service delivery by increasing transparency, cost efficiency, better monitoring etc. Although

there are not many initiatives that can attest this statement, the long term goals of the ever-increasing numbers of e-governance initiatives in India are evidence to this fact. However, there are several conditions that are necessary to realise this potential. An inclusive system design, close collaboration between the stakeholders, understanding of citizens' demands and ground realities and more importantly commitment from the government are a few of them.

This paper concludes with the following three recommendations to improve the success of e-governance initiative in strengthening the accountability relationship between citizens and service providers.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Strengthen Horizontal accountability

One mechanism that could be used to toughen sanctions in the OPGRM is to establish horizontal accountability linkages. The OPGRM already provides the various heads of department access to the list of complaints filed in the system. By involving the independent regulators or ombudsman who are responsible to monitor the performance of these utilities as well as protect citizen-consumer rights, yet another layer of monitoring could be imposed. At the moment, there is no direct link between the OPGRM and the respective regulators.

Complaints/feedback received by the OPGRM against a particular utility could be aggregated and sent to the regulator periodically so that they may suo moto act against errant service providers, instruct improvements and maintenance, levy fines, award compensations to clients etc. As a result of strengthening the horizontal accountability mechanisms through the OPGRM, citizens' trust and confidence of the system and in using this system is greatly enhanced which is very critical for the long-term sustainability of these e-governance projects.

B. Open access for all users – Building Trust through Transparency

Presently, the information available to citizens about complaints in their locality is not sufficient. Data available from the e-grievance PGRM is categorised city- wise, department-wise and ward-wise. Though this is useful to get a broad picture, it does not provide enough information for citizens to engage either individually or collectively with public service agencies on larger policy processes or constructively engage with each other on public issues.

For instance, while attempting to obtain the data on e-grievance PGRM for this paper, I was given to understand that the data belonged to the Government of Karnataka and their permission was needed to access the data. This is antithetical to the claimed objectives of e-governance i.e greater transparency and better accountability. Sharing data from feedbacks and complaints will not only improve the transparency of overall public service performance and reduce the chance for rent-seeking behaviour but also help citizens to trust their public officials which can contribute to an overall

improvement in governance (OECD 2003:2, Welch, Hinnant and Moon 2005). Moreover, independent organisation like welfare associations, NGOs, research think-tanks would greatly benefit from the use of this data to measure the performance of public utilities (Druke 2007:74). This can contribute significantly towards strengthening answerability as well as enforcement aspects of accountability.

C. E-governance to complement Public Management reforms

E-governance is an enabler and not an end in itself. The sustainability of e-governance initiatives such as the OPGRM depends on how well the challenges to current internal governance frameworks are handled by the public administration. Making fruitful use of citizens feedback on performance and request for improvement will be hampered if the administrative machinery does not have the internal capacity to implement the necessary changes. Internal capacity also refers to preparedness or 'e-government readiness' of public officials to tackle the challenges of using new technologies. If channels for complaint are installed without strengthening the capacity of officials to respond, it could potentially lead to frustration and demoralization on the part of public officials (Kumar 2002:5, Druke 2007: 78).

OGPRMs maybe well-intentioned governance systems but in its current state they are akin to putting the cart before the horse. Providing the channel for complaints without setting the house in order will only result in wastage of resources. Standards, sanctions and citizens feedback will have more meaning when they are couple with internal governance changes that is aimed at improving performance of service delivery (OECD 2003:3, Druke 2007:80). Therefore e-governance initiatives such as the OPGRM must be integrated into broader policy and service delivery goals as well as larger public management reform processes for meaningful engagement between officials and citizens that can effect improvements in accountability and service delivery.

REFERENCES

[1] Backus.M, 2001, E-governance in developing countries, IICD Research Brief - No 1, March 2001, http://www.ftpiicd.org/files/research/briefs/brief1.pdf, accessed on May 23, 2009.

[2] Bhatnagar.S et al, 2007, Impact Assessment Study Of E-Government Projects In India, Center for e-Governance, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

[3] Bhatnagar.S, 2003, Transparency and Corruption: Does E-Government Help?, Open Sesame: Looking for the Right to Information in the Commonwealth, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative.

[4] Bhatnagar.S, 2004, E-government From Vision to Implementation: A Practical Guide with Case Studies, Sage Publication: New Delhi

[5] Bhatnagar.S, 2009, Unlocking E-government Potential: Concepts, Cases and Practical Insights, Sage Publication, New Delhi.

[6] Brinkerhoff.D, 2001, Taking Account of Accountability: A Conceptual Overview and Strategic Options, U.S. Agency for International Development, Center for Democracy and Governance, Washington, DC.

[7] Council of Europe, http://www.coe.int/T/E/com/files/themes/e-voting/definition.asp, accessed on May 23, 2009.

[8] Dahl. A, 2000, 'On Democracy', New Haven: Yale University Press

[9] Department of Income Tax, Government of India, https://incometaxindiaefiling.gov.in/portal/index.jsp, accessed on June 5, 2009

[10] Druke.H, 2007, Can E-Government Make Public Governance More Accountable? in Performance Accountability and Combating Corruption, Anwar Shah (ed), IBRD/World Bank, Washington D.C, USA.

[11] E-procurement in the State of Andhra Pradesh, http://www.eprocurement.gov.in/, accessed on June 5, 2009

[12] E-Seva, http://esevaonline.com, accessed on May 25, 2009

[13] Fox.J, 2007, Accountability Politics: Power and Voice in Rural Mexico, Chapter 2, Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK.

[14] FRIENDS, http://www.itmission.kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=82, accessed on May 25, 2009

[15] Gaventa. J, 2006, 'Triumph, Deficit or Contestation: Deepening the Deepening Democracy Debate', IDS Working Paper 264, Brighton: IDS

[16] Goetz.A and Jenkins.R, 2005, Reinventing Accountability: Making Democracies Work for Human Development, Palgrave Macmillan:New York, USA.

[17] Gopika Vaidya, "Online Initiatives to Bring Civic Action Closer to Citizens" www.rediff.com March 4 2004, accessed on 2 August 2009

[18] Grant.R and Keohane.R, 2005, Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics, American Political Science Review, Vol 99, No.1.

[19] Haque.S, 2002, E-Governance in India: It's Impact on Relations Among Citizens, Politicians and Public Servants, International Review of Administrative Sciences, 68; 231. Sage Publications

[20] Heeks.R, 2001, Understanding e-Governance for Development, Institute for Development Policy and Management, i-Government Working paper Series, Paper No 11, University of Manchester: Manchester, UK

[21] Impact Assessment of e-Governance Projects, 2008, Department of Information Technology, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, Government of India.

[22] Kumar. A, 2003, E-Government and Efficiency, Accountability and Transparency, Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries, 12, 2, 1-5.

[23] Making Services Work for Poor People, World Development Report 2004, IBRD/World Bank, Washington D.C., USA.

[24] Ministry of Corporate Affairs, http://www.mca.gov.in/, accessed on June 5, 2009

[25] 'No More Long Lines, Just go Online', Janaagraha, Volume 3 Issue 8, May 1-31 2004, Bangalore. http://www.janaagraha.org/resource/May04_1to31.pdf accessed on 15 August 2009

[26] Norris.P, 2001, Digital Divide? Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Democratic societies, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

[27] O'Donnell.G, 1999, Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies in The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies, Schedler.A, Diamond.L and Plattner.M (Eds), Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc: London

[28] Online Complaint Management System, http://www.praja.org/our-project-online-complaint-management-system.php, accessed on May 5 2009

[29] Online Public Grievance Lodging and Monitoring System, Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievance, Ministry of Personnel, Public grievance and Pensions, Government of India, (http://pgportal.gov.in/index.html) accessed on May 20, 2009.

[30] Paul S 1998 Making Voice Work: the report card on Banglalore's public service, Volume 1 Policy, Research working paper ; no. WPS 1921, WB

[31] Paul.S, 1994, Does Voice- Matter? For Public Accountability Yes, POLICY RESEARCH WORKING PAPER 1388, World Bank, Washington D.C, USA.

[32] Paul.S, 2003, New Mechanisms for Public Accountability: The Indian Experience, Public Affairs Centre: Bangalore, India.

[33] Peruzzoti.E and Smulovitz.C,2006, Enforcing the Rule of Law: Social Accountability in the New Latin American Democracies, Univeristy of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, USA.

[34] Schedler.A, Diamond.L and Plattner.M (Eds), 1999, The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc: London.

[35] Schware, R. 2000. Information Technology and Public Sector Management in Developing Countries: Present Status and Future Prospects. Indian Journal of Public Administration 46(3), 411–16

[36] Shyam Ranganathan, 26/09/08, Penalties under RTI Act failing to yield fine, The Hindu, http://www.thehindu.com/2008/09/26/stories/2008092660411100.htm (23 August 2009)

[37] Singh. P, 2008, Recommendations for meaningful and successful e-governance in India, ITforchange, Policy brief June 2008

[38] Skocpol. T, 2003, 'Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civil Life', Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

[39] The Bhoomi Project, http://www.bhoomi.kar.nic.in/, accessed on May 25, 2009

[40] The e-Government Imperative: Main Findings, 2003, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Policy Brief March 2003, available at http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/60/60/2502539.pdf. Accessed on July 15 2009

[41] United Nations e-Governments Survey Report: From e-Government to Connected Governance, 2008, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Administration and Development Management, United Nations: New York.

[42] Wallack.J and Nadhamuni.S, (___), USER INNOVATION AND EGOVERNANCE DESIGN, eGovernments Foundation, www.egovernments.org, accessed on May 15 2009.

[43] Wallack.J, 2007, Fire Alarms in Action: Making Sense of User Feedback on City Services, Mimeo, UCSD.

[44] Welch.E Hinnant.C and Moon M, 2005, Linking Citizens Satisfaction in E-Government and Trust in Government, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Vol. 15, no. 3.

[45] (_____), Engaging with Citizens to Improve Services, Water and Sanitation Programme – South Asia, World Bank, New Delhi.

[46] Telephone interview with Complaints officer of the BMC on July 29th 2010 on the Complaints system designed and operated by the BMC since February 2007.