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REVUE INTERNATIONALE DES GOUVERNEMENTS OUVERTS

IMODEV
LES ÉDITIONS

À PROPOS DE NOUS

La **Revue Internationale des Gouvernements ouverts (RIGO)/ the International Journal of Open Governments** est une revue universitaire créée et dirigée par Irène Bouhadana et William Gilles au sein de l'IMODEV, l'Institut du Monde et du Développement pour la Bonne Gouvernance publique.

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IMODEV est une organisation scientifique internationale, indépendante et à but non lucratif créée en 2009 qui agit pour la promotion de la bonne gouvernance publique dans le cadre de la société de l'information et du numérique. Ce réseau rassemble des experts et des chercheurs du monde entier qui par leurs travaux et leurs actions contribuent à une meilleure connaissance et appréhension de la société numérique au niveau local, national ou international en en analysant d'une part, les actions des pouvoirs publics dans le cadre de la régulation de la société des données et de l'économie numérique et d'autre part, les modalités de mise en œuvre des politiques publiques numériques au sein des administrations publiques et des gouvernements ouverts.

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ABOUT US

The **International Journal of Open Governments / Revue Internationale des Gouvernements ouverts (RIGO)** is an academic journal created and edited by Irène Bouhadana and William Gilles at IMODEV, the Institut du monde et du développement pour la bonne gouvernance publique.

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IMODEV is an international, independent, non-profit scientific organization created in 2009 that promotes good public governance in the context of the information and digital society. This network brings together experts and researchers from around the world who, through their work and actions, contribute to a better knowledge and understanding of the digital society at the local, national or international level by analyzing, on the one hand, the actions of public authorities in the context of the regulation of the data society and the digital economy and, on the other hand, the ways in which digital public policies are implemented within public administrations and open governments.

IMODEV regularly organizes conferences and symposiums on these topics, and in particular every year in November the Academic days on open government and digital issues, whose sessions are published online [ISSN: 2553-6931].

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ENHANCING CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESSES OF GOVERNANCE: DIGITAL INDIA AND MYGOV

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Digital India Program (DIP) is an ambitious umbrella programme of Government of India. It weaves together a large number of technologies with governance processes and services to empower Indian citizens around its three vision areas *viz.* "Digital Infrastructure as a Utility to Every Citizen", "Governance and Services on Demand", and "Digital Empowerment of Citizens". These key areas of visions rest on nine pillars of Digital India ranging from provision of "Broadband for all" to its forty-four mission mode projects related to governance services under "e-*Kranti"* pillar to "IT for Jobs" and "Digital Literacy for All" and so on[1]. DIP is not merely a great opportunity to develop the digital backbone of the country but also promises to deliver a real improvement in the quality of life of Indians by offering an on-demand easier access to governance and services using Internet, Mobile, Cloud based *Digi*-lockers, Common Service Centres-CSCs, Post offices, public Wi-Fi hotspots and much more. In fact majority of the activities and services delineated under government-to-government (G2G), government-to-businesses (G2B) and government-to-citizens (G2C) categories have been proposed to be delivered using technology through the aegis of DIP by means of innovative implementation models such as 4P model (Panchayat-Public-Private-Partnership). The proposed actions and services are further expected to be refined by all the stakeholders in an open and interactive manner using digital mechanisms such as portal of MYGOV[2]. Further, DIP is also expected to bring all the digital activity to India by ushering in other related concepts such as Smart Cities and therefore lead to a ripple effect business opportunities in all the related sectors such as Software, Support, Hardware, Government Services and Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES). The ultimate mission of DIP is to transform India into a digitally empowered society and a knowledge economy by leveraging information technology (IT) as a growth engine of new India.

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[1] http://deity.gov.in/sites/upload_files/dit/files/Digital%20India.pdf.
[2] https://mygov.in/.

THE ROAD AHEAD OR ROAD BLOCKS: DECIPHERING AND ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

Opportunities unleashed by DIP are enormous but how can any innovative scheme / product be bereft of challenges and concerns? To deem it as a successful program, DIP first needs to be pragmatically evaluated from a citizen's prism of availability, utility, affordability, accessibility, and adaptability. As already understood, DIP has many components and each one has to be addressed to make the big vision a reality. The real tantalizing part, therefore, lies in demystifying the challenges couched behind the attractive Digital India Program. Let's try to unravel and address some of these in a constructive manner.

A) Support and not Divert the Governance Focus

Infrastructure as a Utility' is the first vision of DIP; the moot question is whether the provision of broadband/ mobile connectivity or cloud spaces by itself assures the capability enhancement of Indian citizens (even if it is well coupled with its other two vision statements of DIP *viz.* e-services and e-literacy)? Though connectivity does stay as the backbone for any ICT4D (information and communication technologies for development) agenda especially in the wake of the fact that India has been recently ranked quite poorly at position of 131 out of 167 countries in ICT Development Index-IDI (ITU, 2015)[3] but let us also not lose sight of the fact that as per World Happiness Report (2015)[4], *India ranks* abysmally lower at 117 out of 158 nations on *global happiness index, which is a far more dismal reality for India than the former one of being at a poorer position in IDI rank* . The underlying fact is that the achievement of a 100% Digital India in the present situation and scenario is still a long drawn and distant (but not unattainable) target. Till then, the planned heavy investments in digital infrastructure might usurp a lion-share of not just all the erstwhile budgetary provisions but also the governance focus as well as administrative capacities of our service delivery agencies. For instance, provision of rural broadband connectivity should not elbow out the overall governance focus on provision of legal infrastructure, *pucca* roads, clean water, sanitation provisions, regular electricity supply or equal number of investments in provision of logistic support to smoothen "ease-of-doing-business" in rural regions. To learn the balancing act, maybe India

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[3] *Measuring the Information Society Report* (ITU- International Telecommunication Union, 2015): Released on 30 November, 2015, the report ranks countries on their level of information, communication and technology (ICT) access.
Source: http://www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/press_releases/2015/57.aspx#.VmABCH YrKVM; Accessed on Dec 3, 2015.

[4] *World Happiness Report,* 2015: r*eport* takes into account GDP per capita, life expectancy, social support and freedom to make life choices as indicators of *happiness. India's rank* is lower than several other developing countries such as Pakistan (81), Palestine (108), Bangladesh (109), Ukraine (111) and Iraq (112) and India has dropped six notches from the 2013 *report*, when it was on the 111th spot.

could take a cue or two from holistic development of "*Taobao*" e-commerce villages of China that put an equal emphasis on both online aspects and regional development issues.

B) Indianize and Not Ape

The next logical query that could rankle a social scientist (or any well-meaning Indian) is whether the technological infrastructure development envisioned under DIP[5], based on Indian innovations, would it entail imitation/ replication of "imported" technologies or non-contextual implementation strategies? The forecasted financial estimates are that by the year 2020, India will be spending almost $320 billion (Rs 17 lakh crore) on hardware imports (Business Standard, 2011)[6] . To understand it better, let us look at DIP a bit closely. There is "Mobile First" Insistence in it. It is a well-known fact that most of the components of mobile phones in India are still being imported or are purchased from the "grey" market; this trend has to be minimized to ensure success of the proposed m-governance initiatives or "mobile-first" processes in Indian context. This further entails establishment of a lucrative ecosystem for local manufacturers, entrepreneurs and startups who are working towards *Indianisation* of m-content.

A quick review of some of the Digital India reference material[7] has indicated lack of explicit imperatives or policy insistences for the same. As an instance, disregard of indigenous ICT solutions in the proposed implementation of ICT based education projects such as *e-Basta*[8] could make such Digital India projects unsustainable in the longer run. Since there is poor ICT infrastructure in the rural areas, for *e-Basta* to be popular and hence more inclusive and sustainable, it should be based on indigenous technological innovations/ free and open source software/ localized ICT solutions such as *Akash, Simputer, Infothela or Gobar* gas-based power supplies. Of course, glorious references have been sighted elsewhere, under the banner of "Make in India". However, in a hurried desperation to churn out quantity, do we really need "copy-paste" models, lifted from Occidental setups or do we instead incubate more of our own technological innovations (*jugaads*) that use available Indian resources and indigenous knowledge? We also need to wean away from the traditional planning and policy-making structures of governance and encourage a healthy streak of creativity—both within the government setups and amongst our citizens. To assure this, more congenial spaces have to be created: "Innovate

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[5] Pillar 1: Broadband Highways, Pillar 2: Universal Access to Mobile Connectivity, and Pillar 3: Public Internet Access Programme.

[6] http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/it-hardware-import-bill-to-surpass-fuel-import-costs-by-2020-fears-govt-111053100075_1.html.

[7] http://deity.gov.in/content/digital-india-book.

[8] e-Basta, in line with the government's Digital India initiative, is a project that has created a framework to make school books accessible in digital form as e-books to be read and used on tablets and laptops.

for Digital India Challenges"[9] is a case to the point. Such attempts would make e-governance solutions offered by DIP more and more responsive to the needs and aspirations of Indian citizenry.

C) Holistic Inclusiveness and Not Digital Alienation

Parallel to the Digital India Program, MyGov (mygov.nic.in) too is an important digital initiative expected to create responsive ecosystems for participatory and transparent governance in India. However, if digital consultation processes stay as the sole mechanism to build collaborative decisions then it might not be truly representative of the majority of Indian communities. With only 20% of Indians having access to the Internet at least occasionally and a mere 14 per cent owning a smartphone (Poushter. Bell and Oates, 2015)[10], a unidirectional focus on public engagement through only digital tools, might further dissociate the governance tools from those who have no access or ability to access such tools; while the paradox is that, it is these communities only who beseech more equity and attention from governance gear.

A Buffet and not a la' Carte: It is quite understandable that MYGOV had never intentionally intended to alienate the disempowered ones further away from voicing their opinions in the processes of Governance and that our citizen collaboration choices must not be restricted to binary options of "voices of elite on digital channels " or "no digital channel and no voices". Instead, we must expand them to capture "all voices from all channels". This is possible, only if we consider a multi-channel strategy of citizen participation in the processes of Governance. This would empower each and every citizen of the country to voice their opinion using channels that are available, affordable and convenient to use, as per their respective realities. India has seen some of them, albeit not in a very sustained and systematic manner.

Some of the collaboration options[11] that could be mixed and matched, are listed herewith:

– 1. *the Internet-based collaboration channels/ mechanisms:* These could include digital portals, digital collaborative platforms including social media[12], crowd sourcing, mobile apps, push/ pull sms services (compatible to smart and non-smart phones as well), multi-site video-conferencing, etc.

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[9] http://www.indianweb2. com/2015/05/26/intel-dst-call-for-entries-for-the-innovate-for-digital-india-challenge/.

[10] J. POUSHTER, J. BELL, R. OATES, *Internet Seen as Positive Influence on Education but Negative Influence on Morality in Emerging and Developing Nations*, Pew Research Center, pp. 24-26. Retrieved from http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2015/03/Pew-Research-Center-Technology-Report-FINAL-March-19-20151.pdf

[11] Each of these could be elaborated and debated, which is beyond the scope of this study.

[12] Of course, there are issues within this issue- social media must be used with discretion as majority of the popular ones are on proprietary platforms.

– 2. *Non-internet collaboration channels/ mechanisms*: Some of the good examples to this are FM channels a la' *Mann ki Baat*, Community Radio etc.

– 3. *Non-electronic collaboration channels/ mechanisms*: The options under this are several including deliberative polls, social audits, Community of Practices-CoPs, round table meetings, citizen consultation rounds-CCRs *a la'* conducted in IIPA in 2009 called as *Nagrik Paramash Daur*, regular local *jantaa darbars,* ward councils, Area *Sabhas*, opinion surveys, print-media responses from local dailies, Participatory rural appraisal etc.

In India, we can't afford governance instruments wherein only 'the stronger ones communicate, muffling the strained whispers of masses'! The point here is not just to resort to a combination of these channels for public participation but also to collate the inputs provided from each in policy formulation. Also such a multi-channel strategy shall bring governance closer to the masses and also help to bring communities closer to each other in resolving governance issues at the local level.

As a first step in the use of multi-channel strategy, suitable channels and mechanisms must be identified depending on the context, range (local, state or national), priority and nature of governance issues being discussed. Each of the identified channels, then be accorded equal importance in the policy formulation mechanisms. After this, the identical governance issue may be broadcasted and responses[13] from each of these identified channels may be collected in the same stipulated time-frame. Subsequently, all these responses could be collated and then evaluated using Big Data technologies and related knowledge analytics techniques. The "results", hence arrived, could then be beamed back to all these channels, making sure that a healthy feedback loop prevails (as propounded in systems theory) for awareness, reconsideration or further debate by the masses. Finally, let these "results", derived from data collated from various channels, serve as policy inputs to the respective decision support systems of national/regional/local importance. The simple theoretical presumption of the proposed model is that in a diverse and developing country like India, processes of governance and public engagement must be supported by different tools and mechanisms to be deemed truly inclusive. Provision and popular usage of such collaborative mechanisms (and not just "digital", "single-windows") would also ensure that governance truly comes closer to the doorsteps of the citizens.

On a conclusive note, one could say that the first (and may not be the only one) mistake we are making in this whole Digital India Program is treating digital tools to be the sole savior to governance malaise. This might lead to blinkered decision-making or skew our understanding of "popular public opinion". A technocrat might still argue that creation of technological infrastructure is the first step in our journey towards being an

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[13] Issues within issues – let the citizens' identity be masked.

empowered knowledge economy but a conscientious citizen would always aver that such technological provisions can never instantaneously translate into digital empowerment of masses.

In a diverse and developing country like India, it is expected to be a gradual journey requiring sustained inputs and pragmatic timeframes. Until that time we need to reengineer our existing administrative services and governance mechanisms with innovative homegrown solutions as well as by promoting institutional innovations at the local level. Such an all-rounded strategy will ensure that the benefits of Governance supported by Digital India Programme are accrued by one and all especially the minorities, marginalized communities, and geographically alienated setups. After all, it is not lopsided emphasis on digital investments but a balanced distribution on achievement of governance outcomes that can spur sustainable development in India, catalyzed by technology.

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