

## Technology Adoption for Programme Delivery

### What is the issue?

- India has emerged as a pioneer in building digital tools to improve program governance, over the period.
- However, leveraging technology platforms for effective program delivery poses unique challenges, which policymakers need to be aware of.

### What are the concerns?

- Using technology requires learning new ways to make demands and withdraw benefits, and new norms and modes of local behaviour.
- So for most citizens, the use of new tech-savvy tools can be alienating and intimidating.
- Local governments and citizens face problems in using technology, with delays and exclusion due to poor infrastructure and connectivity.
- Rapid deployment of new technologies is at times seen as attacks on past improvements in delivery. It is also giving rise to new forms of corruption.
- However, these are said to be the initial glitches in the process of transition to digital ways of interacting with the government.

### What are the challenges involved?

- **Problem identification** - Technology must be seen as a tool, and not a solution in itself.
- E.g. Aadhaar and Direct Benefit Transfers (DBTs) are just the tools to address the problems of payment leakages due to fake beneficiaries and not the solutions in themselves.
- Aadhaar is a proof of identity, not eligibility or priority. Likewise, DBT can only provide a secure pipeline to transfer payments.
- Neither of the tools solves questions on who should be given greater priority for transfers.
- These tools cannot confirm if the person receiving the benefit is in most need of it, as exclusion continues to plague cash transfer programmes such as social pensions in India.
- **State capability** - There exists an idea of removing the human interface from the delivery landscape by making processes as automated as possible.
- This is rooted in viewing the 'last-mile' cadres as being powerful, corrupt

entities who are indifferent to the needs of citizens.

- But notably, skill sets, capabilities, and size of the local bureaucracy are critical to ensure that benefit transfer systems are inclusive and citizen-friendly.
- For instance, in implementing electronic payments through DBT, -
  - i. camps have to be organised
  - ii. citizen information and consent for data sharing must be sought
  - iii. program users need to be informed and counselled
  - iv. bank accounts and identification proofs need to be produced
- All these tasks require various agencies to coordinate at the local level.
- But these are plagued by understaffed, unmotivated, and over-tasked Panchayat and block office.
- The effective use of technology requires a far more capable state, for the technology to enhance state capabilities as intended.
- **Power asymmetries** - With increased use of technology, programmers, government IT agencies and system developers are increasingly powerful in the new tech-savvy welfare state.
- These agencies hold vast amounts of private data on transactions and attributes.
- Also, the very language, nature, and production of technology make it opaque and distant from ordinary citizens.
- E.g. if a local Panchayat official was found to be corrupt, complaint can be made to the superiors or politicians
- But complaints triggered by misuse or errors in the use of tech tools can be difficult to pick up, comprehend and process, making targeted beneficiaries powerless.

## What is to be done?

- There has to be clear identification and understanding of the problem which a particular technology would solve.
- Consistently assessing the efficacy of the tools deployed is essential, for them to be the solutions for the problems identified.
- But the challenge of eligibility determination requires a very different set of interventions such as social registries.
- Besides, technology only changes the requirements for human resources; it does not rule out the need for strong local staff.
- Given the heterogeneity across India's villages and cities, the state capability has to be enhanced significantly.
- Policy makers need to be mindful of the new power asymmetries created by

the use of technology.

- Governments should invest in methods to balance these asymmetries.
- The recent regulations and laws following the Aadhaar judgment must be complemented by proper systems.
- This should allow citizens to query and update their information through online and offline methods.
- E.g. clearly codified data exchange, privacy and consent frameworks, etc
- In all, reaping maximum gains from digital resources needs complementary investments in regulation, laws, and human resources.

**Source: Indian Express**

