

COMMENT

Building trust in governance

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A service delivery platform which builds trust between citizens and government has shown results

Historically, Indians have had low social trust and have looked to authorities to enforce compliance. But over the last decade, India has witnessed a big and welcome change in social trust. Indians are increasingly comfortable sending money to a phone number from their phones (UPI, PayTM) and getting into taxis driven by strangers (Ola, Uber).

How trust grows

This trust is experiential: it is built as consumers get consistent information and predictability, over time, every time. When we book an Ola cab, we get an OTP every time, we can track our cab every time, the OTP works every time we give it to the driver, and so on. Of course, the actual delivery of service needs to live up to expectations for trust to be built, and there can be the occasional glitch. Still, having visibility of interactions directly (without having to go ask someone to look up a request status or complaint number) and a mechanism to hold the service provider accountable is fundamental to building trust.

In our experience in working in the area of service delivery by urban local bodies, we find that citizens' default position is low trust. Their past experiences, where requests have not been responded to, or have vanished into the ether, adds to this sense of apprehension. Corruption makes this worse. The worst is paying a bribe and still not being served. We also observe power imbalance: citizens feel that they do not have any recourse.

These frictional interactions pile up over time. They lead to apathy, disengagement, a 'nothing will happen' mindset. The good news is that when government service delivery manifests this new currency of social trust – visibility of status, alerts at key stages, knowing who is accountable, ways to escalate the complaint, ways to rate or give feedback – the confidence of citizens starts to grow. Over time, the trust deficit is reversed, and citizen participation increases.

In Andhra Pradesh, we at eGov Foundation partnered with the government to roll out a

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citizen services delivery platform (PuraSeva) in all 110 towns and cities. We saw the positive impact of this platform on social trust. One of the areas reformed was the complaints process: multiple channels to lodge complaints, prompt acknowledgment with a reference number assigned, SMS notifications providing an expected completion date and responsible person, and notifications of each status change. Finally, citizens are invited to provide a star rating upon completion. Moreover, citizens and civil society groups can view the performance data for their localities through open dashboards.

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The results have been encouraging. The number of complaints has increased – not because problems have gone up, but because citizens trust the government to resolve them. The speed of resolution and the percentage of complaints resolved within the designated time have both increased sharply. Perhaps the best indicator of this new approach is that if a citizen does not provide a star rating, they will get a call from the local government, asking them to rate their satisfaction with the services received. When the government seeks and responds to feedback, it is rewarded with trust.

When a digital system is designed, its attention to the small things creates these trust-building environments. These include what the user sees when they first log in, how many steps they are being asked to take, what feedback or signal they are receiving at each step, and so on. Each interaction is an occasion to send a trust signal, to raise low expectations and meet new, high ones. This is how the ‘nothing will happen’ mindset gets replaced with the confidence that yes, something will be done.

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