

Kerala needs to raise its own bar of transparency in service delivery

Goutham K.A., Praseeda Mukundan - CPPR
PR Krishnamoorthy, Krishnakumar Thiagarajan -
eGovernments Foundation



Through the historic win in the Kerala Assembly elections, the LDF government is all set to rule another term in the State. The government which is known for its welfare measures and pro-citizen initiatives have gained the confidence of the people for another term.

With the thumping mandate received, the government should initiate the governance reforms that are pending for sometime. One of the areas that the government should now focus more on is already initiated e-governance programmes thereby facilitating a more citizen centric governance. The prevailing pandemic situation also re-emphasizes the need of taking the services to the citizens' doorstep.

Need for a Citizen Centric Governance Model

Providing services based on the needs of the people more than any other imperative of the government is the prime motive behind a citizen centric governance model. Such an approach will lead to increased accessibility, flexibility and security in the Government to citizen (G2C) transactions which will facilitate to make the system more transparent. An empowered local government system will have more bearing on the various needs and requirements of the citizens in the neighbourhood. The efficiency and effectiveness of the Local Self Governments (LSGs) will be tested and its success will determine the robust governance architecture of the state government in the process. E-governance initiatives can be a catalyst in facilitating this.

The era of digitization started in the state of Kerala with the inception of Kerala State IT Mission (KSITM) in 1999. The introduction of a network of Common Service Centres in the form of Akshaya is one of the benchmark projects of the government to spread e-literacy and this has enabled broadband access to 90% of the Kerala villages in the form of Akshaya centres. They provide services like Aadhar enrollment, e-district services, utility bill payments and motor vehicle license payments among others.

Currently along with more than 2000 Akshaya centres, the local government of Kerala has e-platforms such as Sevana (for Civil Registration and Pension), Sanchaya (for property tax), Sanketham (for building permits), Soochika (for status monitoring, file tracking) and so on introduced with an aim of digitizing the local bodies and improving the efficiency of services provided by them. Apart from these, there are the citizens' grievance cells functioning under the a public grievance redressal mechanism (counter 'Straight Forward') which is functioning under the aegis of the Chief Minister's office to which 2,04,753 complaints had been received as on 01/01/2019. Other than that a grievance redressal cell called 'For the people' has been implemented to make the Local Self Governing bodies efficient and corruption free. The complaints and grievances ranging from delays in receiving services, corruption, etc. could be raised by citizens through such platforms. Together with that the state has now introduced more initiatives to integrate the available services, making steps in the direction of complete automation of processes and moving towards the target of computerizing all the LSG bodies. ILGMS (Integrated Local Governance management System) is such an initiative with an aim to integrate all the available services and to make them completely web-based. Being in its initial stages, its effectiveness is yet to be understood. It is a fact that such initiatives can increase the citizen's trust and participation in governance, but the level of awareness among the general public regarding such initiatives, their operational efficiency and the user-friendliness is to be explored further.

Kerala's Status

A Case Example

Looking deeper into one of the citizen centric services, will give a broad idea on the issues and limitations faced by them. A comparison between the three softwares which is currently in use for issuing building permits in the state will give a clear picture on the challenges persisting in this particular service. 'Sanketam' is the first software initiated in 2013 to issue building permits online and as of March 2019, five lakh building permits were issued through this. As per the officials in the concerned departments, the software improved transparency and the monitoring mechanism but there was no provision for automated scrutiny of the uploaded files. Thereby not proving to be 'very' efficient as there was no significant change in the working pattern of the officials. Also since it was not a single point solution the beneficiaries had to visit different departments for getting NOCs and other related documents which created further delay and compromised the intended target.

It is observed that an average of 30 days is needed for issuing a building permit with a minimum of 2 visits to the concerned LB. Understanding these concerns IBPMS (Intelligent Building Plan Management System) had been introduced in 2018 in all the corporations except Kozhikode and the municipalities of Guruvayur, Alappuzha and Palakkad. This is an end to end web based system intended to reduce manual interventions, physical processing and to become a single point solution for disposal of building permits. Even though it ensures digital availability of files and reduced processing time, the files submitted by the beneficiaries require a high degree of technical compliance, making it less user friendly.

In addition to this, updating the software based on the changes in the notified building guidelines is a laborious process. As a result it is currently not in use because the latest amendments in the Kerala Municipality Building Rules are yet to be updated. 'Suvega' is the third software designed by the eGov Foundation, which is currently in use in the Kozhikode Municipal Corporation. This was implemented as a pilot project in 2016.

Advantages of this software compared to the others currently in use are absolutely higher. As stated by officials, the software takes an average of 45 seconds to check the compliance of the drawings submitted thereby drastically reducing the time taken for manual scrutiny. The number of pending files related to the approval of building permits has also been reduced by one tenth. Unlike others apart from reducing manual intervention considerably, this superior software requires a low degree of technical compliance (making it more user friendly) and also is easy to upgrade based on latest Government guidelines. Timely upgradation to the revised KMBR 2019 happened in less than 30 days, hence break free Plan approval online processes were on at Kozhikode Municipal Corporation unlike other ULBs. Thus, it is to be noted that only 1 ULB in the State has a better performing system in place.

There are high chances that this might be the case with other e-governance initiatives if analysed in depth. The government should keep this in mind that creating a digital interface need not always give the desired result: if digitisation is not extended to both frontend and backend, if not fully integrated and if it is less user friendly. Needless to mention if the citizens are not aware about such initiatives and are not using them, the whole purpose would be defeated. Various creative ways to reach out to the public and spread awareness on these should also be given due importance during post implementation of such initiatives.

Way Forward

For an e-governance programme, in order to incorporate citizen centricity into the programme design, the needs of the citizen and the state need to be balanced along various parameters- accessibility, flexibility, security and quality.

Few minimum requirements that can be considered are as follows:

In order to ensure that the citizens are aware and able to access services, multiple channels should be enabled for the citizens- Digital (Website, apps, whatsapp etc) , Physical (ULB counters / Citizen Service Centres) and Assisted access (door- step collections, NGOs, Local Shops etc). Citizens should have access to easily findable Self Help videos and manuals on all self serve channels. The system must provide clear instructions to guide the citizens about the eligibility, documentation requirements, payment conditions etc to be available in the public domain before the start of the process for availing any services.

To ensure the maximum availability of services to citizens. The app, website and other channels should be made available in English and the local language. Similarly, there needs to be continuity of service requests processes across various channels (Phone, PC, Tabs, assisted channels etc), which is very seamless in products used by most people today like Amazon, PayTm and others. Any new system must be integrated with existing channels in the state, multiple payment gateways etc to ensure continuity for the citizens and provide options to the end users.

In order to ensure high quality and reliability of services for the citizens, departments must provide open dashboards to citizens to increase transparency and accountability. Similarly, they must allow for proactive status updates that should be intimated to citizens through SMS/ notifications.

SI(System Integrator) must take steps to ensure that citizen data is kept confidential and protected at all times as well as collect the minimum data required to effectively render services, ensure masking of PII's (Personally Identifiable Information) in all view screens and dashboards/ reports and encryption of the sensitive data in the data bases

Incorporating these basic measures within the programme and product design would increase the adoption and trust of the citizens in using e-governance services provided by the states. Thereby this will effectively achieve the key parameters of Citizen Centricity in governance- accessibility, flexibility, security and quality. It is hoped that the newly elected government would further strengthen their ties with its citizens through such e-governance initiatives.

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