

## Information & Local Governance: Behind Myths, Towards Progress

### Abstract

This presentation attempts to look at the relationship between information and local governance in Pakistan. It seeks to unfold the jargon of 'information' and analyse its multiple dimensions.

One has put forth the argument that at local government level, 'Information' sans the ability to interpret it or without accompanied adequate advice remains meaningless.

One has also questioned the assumption of authorities on 'what information people in a community may want'; and how credible and reliable are the methods employed to articulate this assumed need for specific 'information'.

The paper also discusses how information is related to communication and how it can contribute to improved local governance in Pakistan in the context of ongoing decentralisation and devolution of power.

# INFORMATION & LOCAL GOVERNANCE: BEHIND MYTHS, TOWARDS PROGRESS

Arshad H. Bhatti

## Section I

- ◆ The concept of 'information' and its 'perceived' need

Perhaps due to the influence of mass media in communication, information is mostly defined in the context of 'news'. That is anything that people do not know and it could make news is information.

In the context of state-citizen (or community-local authorities) relationship and multiple social transactions, the authorities tend to define information even more narrowly, i.e., information related to budgets, spending and taxes et al.

As far the perceived 'need' is considered, one observes that there are not adequate methods and ways to really know what citizens actually want. It is usually what certain agents, on the behalf of citizens may want would define 'information'.

One believes the type of information people may want at a local level from a local government/ authority is different from the 'information' certain groups (on the behalf of citizens and their interests) may want from a national government. However, it seems the construction of information needed at local level is influenced by the needs at the national level.

In this presentation, the main focus of discussion is information needs at the local level and how they can contribute to improved governance.

- ◆ What 'information'? The assumptions and reality!

In my view, and in the context of citizen-government relationship, any input of any decision taken on the behalf of the 'people' that could effect their lives would constitute 'information'; however only one part. The other parts of the 'information' citizens/ people are perceived to need to know are knowledge of opportunities and facilities that could help them to be, become, choose, have and exercise their social and political choice.

As result of several surveys and studies, the international experience shows that people of a polity/ community may want to know what is there for them,

what is happening and what are the implications of several decisions a certain level of government is taking on their behalf. Therefore, 'information' citizens may want could be related to one or all of the following areas.

- ◆ Rights of the citizens (Right to know, education, safe drinking water, a set of healthy living conditions, quotas and rationing patterns)
  - ◆ Responsibilities of the local government
  - ◆ Opportunities – what is there for citizens
  - ◆ Potentials – what can be done either by the government or by the citizens or by both in collaboration for collective benefit and well being; that is about delivery, facilitation, competition & co-operation
  - ◆ Services and amenities the government is supposed to provide in lieu of the taxes it collects from people/ citizens
  - ◆ Cost of services it is providing and how efficient is this service delivery
  - ◆ How decisions are made; how resources are allocated
  - ◆ What is the balance between discretion and uniformity a certain level of government is exercising
  - ◆ What is outside the domain of local government and what is falsely being promised
  - ◆ How the respective level of government could help facilitate a better life
- ◆ The flaws in construction of 'information' people want.

As stated above, one flaw is that the national (central authority) perception of information needs tends to influence local level information delivery. Second is, as several studies in UK and Europe have indicated, at the local level people are more concerned about their daily lives.

One is mindful of the fact that all people of a polity are also part of some local government/ authority. The core distinction one wishes to highlight is the collective need of (access to and provision of) information from the national government would be different than the varied local needs, which could vary from locality to locality and authority to authority.

## Section II

### ◆ Unfolding the sectoral myths

It seems the articulation by the local authorities on 'information' the citizens may need is marred by certain myths. One is the official thinking is segmented into sectors, and does not tend to go beyond these sectors. Even the sectors could have sub-sectors, which in instances could be more important. For instance, with in the health sector the sub sector of public health becomes very important at the local level.

Similarly, at local level, the personal aspects of healthy social transactions between people become very important. The accepted responsibility of the local government to arrange problem voicing and solving mechanisms for citizens is well known in the UK and Europe.

Education is another sector, which needs to be looked into and beyond certain myths about it that it only means 'formal' education. At local level, the civic education, citizenship and political education also take a key importance.

Participation is another area where 'imagined' takes precedent over the real needs and ways to participate in the local governance and civic life. A local authority needs to be cognisant of why and how of participation.

At local level, people are found to be interested in the reality of local government resources and their so-called lack. There have been instances where people have co-operated with local authorities in not only raising funds to undertake activities in the interest of citizen but also in handling law and order situations. Karachi karvan and Citizen-police liaison committees are two success stories in this regard.

## Section III

### ◆ Information and Communication

This section discusses how information relates to communication a) between people and the local authorities and b) between people and local business, and c) among people. It then analyses implications for improved governance.

One wishes to assert in this section that information provision by government does not automatically lead to valid communication.

### ◆ The printed word vs. illiteracy

Pakistan's literacy rate is a well-known secret. Despite that the major focus of most if not all of the information provision campaigns remain on printing a message. That too first in English and then in Urdu. This might be useful where citizens are a) literate enough and b) have access (in the sense of affordability) to such messages.

### ◆ The assumptions of access and provision

One issue in 'access' to information is people's supposed ability to interpret. For instance, in the wake of very low legal literacy, a law remains a useless tool.

### ◆ Information gathering

Another issue is of perceived one way flow of information. The governments seem to uphold this false perception that its only them who have information which people would be interested; therefore the way in which information is gathered, sifted, articulated, recorded, disseminated, received, understood, employed and benefited become flawed. This type of information articulation exercise does not recognise 'feed back' on information provided as valid correcting and informing method.

### ◆ The issue of capacity to interpret information

The assumption that a certain local government has the ability – let alone the citizens – to interpret and benefit from certain information is flawed. A law needs by-laws, accompanied rules of business and outline of procedures to be a benefiting tool to citizens. The new local governments in Pakistan do

not have this capacity to interpret laws and help translate that interpretation for people's benefit.

- ◆ Media and channels of communication / feedback

This leaves the communication of information in the hands of local media agents which seems to create, than bridging, gaps of communication between the local authority and people.

- ◆ The power and potential of affordable community radio

In the face of low literacy, affordability and therefore access to the printed message, the potential for community radio becomes very potent and relevant.

- ◆ The potential for local social enterprise

Similarly, a local collaboration of business, local government and citizens groups lead to the need of local social enterprise that could help transform information into communication like Citizens Advice Bureau in UK.

## Section IV

### **a) Information and Governance**

The information conceptually speaking could contribute to improved governance at local level when it really reaches people, they interpret it and there are mechanisms to record their feedback as input to both decisions and non-decisions by the local governments.

This also leads to open possibilities as well as potential dangers of inclusion and exclusion of citizens and their interests.

Like at the national level, at local level too there is division of mainstream (local elite and citizens groups with proper links to those who directly influence governance) and the side-stream, who are at a disadvantage to fully participate.

The following issues need to be recognised and understood for inclusion of the side stream and improved governance.

- ◆ The notion of **E<sup>2</sup>** poverty of communities (Electronic & English)
- ◆ The proposition of **I<sup>2</sup>** richness (Indigenous knowledge + Informal ways to share/ communicate that)
- ◆ The role of the interlocutors (public interest initiatives)
- ◆ Diversity of solutions and its potential

### **b) Inter-governmental issues**

Any effort towards improved Governance would be faulty unless the following issues – within the domain of various levels of governments – are recognised, understood and coped with. Because they determine whether the context in which a certain government is operating is enabling or disabling for the respective local government:

- ◆ Problems within - the intra-local government relations
- ◆ Horizontal framework - the inter-local government equations
- ◆ Vertical vertigo – relations with provincial and national governments

## Section V

### Scope for improved governance

At this presentation and discussion level, one would like to highlight four broader conceptual as well as applied issues, which in one's view can ensure improved governance by way of adequate flow of information between people/citizens and the respective local authority. They in turn are likely to contribute to overall national governance.

- ◆ Co-operation vs. competition

That is between citizens, local interest groups and the authorities.

- ◆ Co-orientation

That means taking steps to arrive at common understanding of problems and their possible solutions by way of open flow of information.

- ◆ Capacity exchanges / sharing

That is capacity sharing between various local governments as well as public interest expert groups in the domain of these governments.

- ◆ Low cost pro-people interventions

That refers to mechanisms whereby information provision matches citizens needs and is accompanied by adequate advice.