Use of Social Accountability Tools and Information Technologies in Monitoring and Evaluation

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This note attempts to cover the basic concepts relating to the use of social accountability and information technology to monitor and evaluate public services and other governance processes that affect citizens. With the help of simple though practical examples that use these concepts, the note explains how to bring a qualitative change in monitoring and evaluation by making the whole process more citizen centered and outcome oriented. In turn, these practices can help improve the quality of service delivery. The note also covers a few country-specific initiatives from India to support the related arguments.

In a broad sense, social accountability is a process used to hold the government (through its public officials) accountable to the people. The accountability is extracted by a participatory approach that engages civil society, citizens, and different stakeholders. Social accountability includes a “broad range of actions and mechanisms” that can be used to hold government officials accountable to the citizens (Malena, Forster, and Singh 2004).

The traditional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems typically involve the development of certain key performance indicators that can be monitored. The service or process is then evaluated in terms of its intended outcome(s). A well-rounded M&E system would take into account the concerns of all stakeholders—those on the demand side as well as those on the supply side. The intense engagement of citizens and civil society improves the quality of monitoring and the accuracy of evaluation by eliminating a partial, biased, and one-sided approach to giving information about various performance indicators.

Social Accountability Tools

Social accountability tools involve a step-by-step procedure that ensures civic engagement and promotes citizen participation by revealing their perspectives and priorities regarding what they expect from the services rendered by public officials or state agencies. The tools are usually simple and replicable. They include collation of information and data to arrive at the findings. Therefore, technology becomes very useful in the to-and-fro flow of information between the service provider and the citizens—the stakeholders at the receiving end. The use of information and communi-
Information Technology Platform for Social Accountability Tools

Social accountability tools can be created or improved using an information technology platform. There are some specific technology options available to enable citizens and civil society to interact with government agencies and other state-sponsored institutions. These options range from Web-enabled applications to mobile technologies. Web sites and portals, video conferencing, telecenters, citizen service centers, electronic kiosks, touchscreens, mobile phone-based services using short messages, interactive voice recording, and such hand-held devices as personal digital assistants are some of the available technologies. Use of smart cards and mobile automated teller machines has also been very effective in improving service delivery and ac-
countability in remote areas. They are useful in citizen transactions involving social welfare benefits or payments of wages in the case of government employment programs.4

Arroyo and Sirker (2005) mention Web sites as common ICT tools that can be preventive (for example, ones that help curb corruption and remove the element of discretion), informative (such as those that give useful details of various projects to enhance transparency), or punitive (for instance, sites that publicize the names of corrupt public officials who are punished). The Cristal Web site launched in Argentina is a good example of a site that widely informs citizens about the activities of government agencies. The Center for Good Governance in India has developed a Web site for SASANET,5 which provides self-study material on social accountability tools (figure 2).

Social Accountability and ICT in M&E: Some Examples
Social accountability tools can be used very effectively on information, technology platforms. These tools can range from simple Web sites to Web-based surveys.

An interactive forum provided by a Web site is being used successfully in Germany for evolving a participatory approach in preparing and evaluating citizens’ budgets6 in many cities—for example, Bergheim, Cologne, and the Lichtenberg district of Berlin. The four-stage process involves disseminating information, initiating dialogue, decision making in the council, and communicating decisions to the citizens. These Web sites also allow a “town dialogue” by which the public may freely exchange views on policy issues. There has been a very purposeful online dialogue concerning the new use of Berlin’s Tempel-
hof Airport. These initiatives seem to have worked positively because the local council in Lichtenberg borough passed 37 of the 42 proposed amendments to the budget or to policy issues, and there appeared to be an enhanced accountability on the part of the local administration to the people of the city (Cadddy, Peixoto, and McNeil 2007, pp. 72–75).

The Republic of Korea has an online system to open up administrative procedures to public scrutiny and to ensure transparency. It also uses an anticorruption index constructed through public opinion gathered from people who have actually submitted civic applications (Cadddy, Peixoto, and McNeil 2007, pp. 98–101). Positive opinion about the behavior of civil servants increased from 54 percent in 1998 to 71 percent in 1999. In the five years following the first survey in 1999, the anticorruption index has been consistently improving. This is a good example to show how transparency mechanisms can be improved by disseminating government information on an ICT platform and using e-governance as the basic plank for enforcing social accountability through improved citizen-and-government dialogue.

There are many other examples of the use of ICT to foster public accountability in the developed world and in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. It is reported that the proportion of citizens paying bribes to get copies of land records declined from 33.8 percent to 0.7 percent after these services were computerized in Karnataka, India (Bhatnagar 2009). India, a fast-growing economy, has a very ambitious program to provide supplementary wage employment to rural poor people who are unskilled and do not find employment outside the agricultural season. The program, mandated under the Mahatma Gandhi Na-
tional Rural Employment Guarantee Act of India, 2005 (MGNREGA), has an open-access Web site that raises the level of transparency to new heights by giving complete information (including the wage entitlement) to more than 52 million poor rural households that were provided employment by the government. This drastically reduces the chances of corruption because all the information is in the public domain and may be easily accessed by civil society or any watchdog mechanism.

The success of the MGNREGA lies in using a multipronged approach like the one shown in figure 3. Increasing the awareness and building the capacity of stakeholders to use tools like the social audit and the intensive use of ICT have improved the functioning and proper targeting of this pro-poor program in India. As shown in figure 3, the program uses a variety of ICT tools to improve the access to information and to put in place a robust grievance redress system with a central helpline.

An evaluation of the program was done in the large state of Andhra Pradesh, and the responses of the wage earners enrolled in the program are shown in figure 4.

A multipronged approach including sustained awareness campaigns; capacity building for the target groups; introduction of accountability mechanisms; a social audit and public hearing; and the constant involvement of civil society, higher-level bureaucracy, and the political executive brought very positive results. More than $2 million was recovered from the misappropriated amount, and about 500 charges were filed under criminal law and administrative procedures in the state.

An important lesson to be taken from India’s employment guarantee scheme is that in addition to using ICT, it helps to achieve sustainable improvement in program M&E if
The contribution of civil society and nongovernmental organizations in an M&E exercise may greatly help bring improvements in the services if the agencies providing these services recognize the importance of the input as useful feedback on which to base corrective action. Otherwise, there is a danger that civil society groups will be marginalized and their assessment ignored by the state bureaucracy—not a desirable result of a well-rounded evaluation.

Transparency in government has been legislated in the following countries:
- Australia—Federal Freedom of Information Act (1982),
- Canada—Access to Information Act (1983),
- France—Law on Access to Administrative Documents (1978),
- Germany—Freedom of Information Act (1999),
- Japan—Law Concerning Access to Information Held by Administrative Organs (1999), and

India’s Community Participation Laws and the Right to Information Act (2005) may be mentioned in this regard as examples of legislative support to empower the civil society and provide it a formal space. A reform process in urban governance has started in India with the introduction of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, which makes it mandatory for the states to enact community participation laws for use in the municipalities.

**Appropriate E-Governance Strategy**

It is important to have a long-term strategy to provide a holistic environment for electronic enablement of vital government-to-citizen services as well as adequate infrastructure and connectivity to offer easy access to citizens, civil society, and other stakeholders. This requires the preparation of national and subnational plans for uploading all the public services onto an e-governance platform. The success of these services will depend on how easy it is for the common citizen to access them.

An appropriate strategy should address issues of technology, infrastructure, reengineering of government processes, capacity building, and change management. The United Nations has developed an e-governance readiness index for comparing different countries. The latest concept also considers how strong the inclusiveness of e-governance is in a given country. It asks whether the national government publishes information on items under consideration; whether there are ways for the public to engage in consultations with policy makers, government officials, and one another; and whether citizens can influence decisions directly (for example, by voting online or by mobile telephone).
Benchmarking Service Standards

An essential ingredient for the success of social accountability initiatives is a benchmark for service standards and a measurable and verifiable set of indicators to monitor and evaluate the services provided. Setting the benchmarking standards should involve all the stakeholders. Information technology helps here by enabling a smooth flow of information for the use of all stakeholders—citizens, civil society, government officials, and the politicians.

One way to implement this concept is to provide these standards in the Citizens’ Charters—official documents published by the government departments and service providers stating their commitment to the citizens in regard to standards of service. These charters guarantee a minimum level of service available to the citizen. In case of a breach of this promise, there is a mechanism by which a citizen may raise a grievance and get it redressed through a prescribed process.

The Charter Mark national standard of the United Kingdom provides benchmarking for the services furnished by the public sector. The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Improvement Act, signed in the United States in 1987, is another example of establishing service standards.

The use of citizen report cards in assessing public services in Bangalore, India, is a well-documented initiative. The Public Affairs Center, a nongovernmental organization, rated citizen satisfaction with various public services on a scale, based on two surveys taken in 1994 and 1999. The services covered were housing, municipal services, water and sewerage, electricity, driving licenses, telephones, banking, and health care. The 1999 survey found that, after five years, overall satisfaction with the services improved from 9 percent to 34 percent (with figures varying for each agency). These findings were widely published and an assessment of the impact of citizen report cards on the performance of public agencies gave a number of insights into the related processes. Though the information provided by the report cards was significant, how that information was eventually used to improve the systems and services depended on many diverse factors, such as responsive leadership, available resources, and the institutional environment of the agency concerned (Ravindra 2004). However, the report cards helped in benchmarking and comparing the feedback from users to articulate those issues in the public domain that triggered the change (Balakrishnan 2006).

There is evidence of increasing use of citizen report cards, despite the initial reluctance of the state agencies. This tool is now a permanent feature in Bogotá, Colombia, as part of the Cómo Vamos project. Report cards were also used in Peru to evaluate nutrition, education, health, and employment programs (Fiszbein 2005). The Ukraine People’s Voice project also used citizen report cards10 aimed at benchmarking the service standards and gathering people’s opinions of these services, with a goal of improving the service delivery in Ukrainian cities. This approach also involved building the capacity of citizens’ groups and officials to have meaningful interaction with each other. Citizens and officials were also trained in technical issues, like the design and execution of surveys. These surveys to monitor the service delivery were conducted after a proper needs assessment.

It should be possible in the future to construct report cards with Web-based surveys to gather the opinions of those service users who use the Internet frequently.

Capacity Building and Sustainability Issues

Capacity building and change management are important issues in the use of social accountability and ICT tools for M&E. The absence of these elements would affect the sustainability of new practices. Building aware
ness in the community and equipping people with skills necessary to monitor and assess the quality of services will be crucial here.

There is very limited evidence of a systematic and sustained training and capacity-building program to prepare stakeholders to use social accountability tools. The examples available are mostly in specific and limited domain projects where stakeholder feedback may be built into the project design and where stakeholders develop basic skills to use the accountability tools.

Use of Web sites to post learning material is very common. The examples of SASANET and similar initiatives through the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability (ANSA) are noteworthy here in the context of social accountability.

Web-based training in the use of the Right to Information Act has recently been initiated in India through an e-learning program. It is interesting to note that this initiative in capacity building has targeted both civil society on the demand side and government officials on the supply side. Through different modules, this e-learning course offers the following basic features:

- It is Web enabled.
- It provides an online learning platform with a virtual classroom and both start and end dates.
- Modules are designed with graded difficulty levels, beginning with simple content.
- Learners may ask questions that are answered by the mentors through the virtual classroom and discussion forum.
- At the end of the course, the system administers a test comprising a set of questions randomly selected from a question bank. Learners who pass the test are awarded a certificate by the government. This certificate recognizes the effort put in by the participant.

This useful learning tool has the potential to solve the problem of training and capacity building for millions of people who need to understand the basics of using India’s Right to Information Act. This e-learning program is an important step in improving social accountability. It uses easily accessible means to disseminates knowledge on the technical details of using a legal process. It is running well, and the user feedback on the technology and the course content is very positive (as shown in figure 5).

**ICT and Social Accountability in Subsidized Housing for Poor People in India**

India has a very large housing program involving subsidies for construction of houses for the poor. An Internet portal supporting this program in the state of Andhra Pradesh has a database of more than 6.5 million houses. This Web site brings transparency, making the diversion or embezzlement of funds difficult. The Web site (http://housing.cgg.gov.in/phase3/BenShow.do?ben_id=091292421P39
79523) has a facility to upload photographs of a building site before house construction begins and at various stages of completion. All managerial processes, including a management information system, are maintained online. It is also very useful for conducting a social audit and preparing report cards or community scorecards because all information is available on the Internet. This information can be verified easily by members of civil society or any independent agency wishing to compare the situation on the ground with what is reported on the Web site.

**Call Center for Seeking Information from Public Offices**

An ICT-enabled call center known as Jankari, run by a nongovernmental organization in the Indian state of Bihar, has contributed to improved social accountability, as evidenced by the number of requests filed under the Right to Information Act. This center is a simple facility through which even illiterate citizens can make a phone call and explain the information they require. Their needs are deciphered by the facilitator in the call center and are converted into a formal application for getting relevant information from government records.

This information usually is helpful in enforcing accountability. It also helps in the redress of grievances for people adversely affected by such issues of service delivery as access to government welfare programs, subsidized housing programs for the poor, public distribution systems, and the like. Figure 6 shows how the number of requests for information under the Right to Information Act has risen steadily over the last three years through the Jankari call center.

**Quality Improvement in Government Schools in Delhi, India**

An interesting initiative to improve accountability in the government schools in the National Capital Territory of Delhi has been implemented. The exercise included training the school officials in the use information technology and providing a public interface to enhance accountability. The hallmark of this program was to provide e-governance in the management of schools; and to give citizens direct online access to all the relevant officers, including the minister of education.

A feedback system was in place for the citizens and parents to communicate with the department to ask questions or give suggestions. The attendance report of both teaching and nonteaching staff was kept in the public domain, with online recording of inspection reports by superior officers. As detailed for the 10th grade in table 1, these interventions showed a substantial reduction in the performance gap that had existed between 1997–98 and 2006–07.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gap (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997–98</td>
<td>55.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004–05</td>
<td>38.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005–06</td>
<td>28.59</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006–07</td>
<td>13.93</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Adapted from Kundra and Kumar (2008).
government schools and private schools, and the pass percentage increased from 40 percent in 2001 to 77 percent in 2007 (Kundra and Kumar 2008).

It is difficult to attribute the positive changes in the government school system in Delhi to a possibly enhanced level of social accountability alone because there must have been all-round attempts at comprehensive systemic improvement simultaneously. But the importance of nurturing a culture of social accountability by skillful use of e-governance cannot be ignored in any such attempt at managing change in service delivery systems.

Conclusion
There is a definite role for ICT in the design and implementation of M&E systems, with the help of social accountability tools. Evidence is growing that, even in case of pro-poor service delivery from public agencies, the level of transparency in state-run programs increases substantially with the use of these tools. Information technology facilitates the free flow of information, and its positive role in establishing a robust dialogue between the citizens and the agencies of the state cannot be disputed. This then improves the effectiveness of social accountability tools in improving the reliability and effectiveness of a typical M&E system. There is a need to discover how the capacity of civil society and of public officials can be built to best leverage the use of information technology to raise the standards of social accountability and improve the quality of evaluation for better service delivery.

Notes
2. See http://go.worldbank.org/GILYME1Y0.
3. The acronym SMART (commonly used in the M&E literature) refers to the qualities of indicators: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.
5. SASANET stands for South Asia Social Accountability Network. Its Web site (http://www.sas anet.org) was developed by the Centre for Good Governance, Hyderabad, India, with support from the World Bank Institute. It provides information on tools such as procurement monitoring, Citizen Report Card, e-procurement and participatory budgeting.
6. A citizen’s budget is the outcome of a statutory process of participation in which a citizen may submit his or her proposals for expenditure to the city government. The proposal can be debated and ranked using the Internet.
7. The evaluation is available at the following site: http://www.rd.ap.gov.in/SAudit/Standing_Under_the_Arch_V3.pdf.
8. The information is based on the author’s personal discussions with the officials of the Rural Development Department.
9. The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission is a flagship program of the Indian government. Its intent is to aim a strategic intervention at accelerated urban development.
10. The project’s report card program is funded by the World Bank, the Canadian International Development Agency, the Open Society Institute, and the Canadian Bureau of International Education. It was initiated in March 1997. Details may be found at http://www.undp.org/oslocentre/docs08/sofia/Case%20Study%20of%20Citizens%20Report%20Cards%20Ukraine%20FINAL.pdf.
12. The Indian government’s Department of Personnel and Training has initiated an exercise in capacity building for government workers and members of civil society that focuses on use of the Right to Information Act through this e-learning course. This was designed by the Center for Good Governance, Hyderabad, India. Each session runs for two weeks, and 7,000 participants have used the program since 2009.

About the Author
Rajiv Sharma has worked in leadership positions in the Indian public sector and has dealt extensively with developmental issues involving poverty alleviation, edu-
cation, urban development, agriculture, environmental management, and e-governance. Until recently, he worked as director general of the Center for Good Governance, Hyderabad, India.

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