



# Accountability for good governance

BY KP SHASHIDHARAN

**T**he biggest challenge before the Government is to improve the living standards of more than 680 million Indians. This means ensuring access to the adequacy of nutritious food, including potable water, shelter, clothing, health, sanitation and education that empower them to earn their livelihood. This arduous task is possible only when India's engine of growth is not only fuelled to its maximum capacity but also piloted with good governance deeply rooted in an accountability matrix and an ethical framework.

Public finance statistics tell the story of India's huge public spending on basic services. It amounted to about Rs. 5,70,000 crore at current prices in 2012. And it increased significantly during the subsequent budgets. India's public spending includes expenditure on providing food through the Public Distribution System and other nutrition schemes like the Mid-day Meal scheme. It covers welfare plans for women and children. It also includes subsidy on household fuel and spending on primary and secondary schooling, health care, drinking water, and sanitation. Expenditure on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act scheme also comes under the public finance category. At the end of spending the most important question is how much of it has gone to the targeted population.

Good governance with an effective oversight and accountability framework can only derive the desired outcome from public spending. It is important to track down the money flow from budget allocations across the physical value chain till the end consumer and reduce it substantially, if not eliminate, pilferage by middlemen and profiteers. Prime requisites are a reliable Information Communication Technology-based good e-governance infrastructure and the creation of an authentic database at every stage for timely monitoring and midcourse corrections. Even now, public

finance expenditure is based on mostly approximations and not on a proper database. Measuring the outcome and relating it to the laid down guidelines and expected results can be done only when the database is accurate, reliable, complete and comparable.

To measure the effectiveness of public expenditure, the accountability framework, which acts as a backbone of good governance, should be strengthened. The multiple agencies involved in policy formulation, planning, implementation, monitoring and taking preventive and corrective action on government programmes, projects, schemes and activities must be made accountable.

Multiple governmental and private players involved in the execution of government programmes need to be made accountable to stakeholders. Only an effective system of checks and balances can ensure desired performance and effective service delivery. There can be legal accountability by enacting laws that mandate desired behaviour from public officials and private service providers, with the right to judicial remedy. Constitutional checks and balances exercised by authorities are significant. Reputational accountability induces better performance when the image is at stake. Ensuring transparency by engaging the public at different levels from the policy formulation, execution, monitoring and mid-course correction stages using the print and electronic media, including the mobile and Internet-based social networks, assumes importance in e-governance. The functioning of the permanent executive or bureaucratic machinery needs to be effectively reviewed by the political executive, while the accountability of political leadership is to be ensured by a sensitive electorate. ■

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