

Between outlays and outcomes

16 Jan 2006, 0000 hrs IST, RUKMINI BANERJI and WILIMA WADHWA
timesofindia.indiatimes.com

Various initiatives in the area of governance, health, water, sanitation, which were earlier limited to NGOs, are now spreading as movements beyond the confines of small organisations.

These groups have not only been active in mobilising grass-roots initiatives, in piloting programmes on scale but also in significantly shaping policy. Citizens, young and old, rural and urban, are getting involved.

An innovative example of how to engage citizens in assessing service delivery is the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2005).

Facilitated by Pratham, the first phase of ASER 2005 was conducted between November 14 and December 20, 2005. In each rural district, a local group was identified.

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Further, these mechanisms must be simple and consistent, so that citizens can see for themselves whether progress is being made. Results generated must be useful locally and allow aggregation to district and state levels.

Take the case of elementary education. Citizens are now paying a 2% education cess on central taxes to finance the commitment to universalise quality basic education.

The government's commitment is to ensure that all children (6-14) in India will attend and complete elementary school (through standard eight) and receive an education of satisfactory quality.

What is the data currently available to track progress? For Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the government regularly gathers information on enrolment, infrastructure and other inputs.

There are also occasional studies done by researchers. However, independent, timely data is scarce, especially on outcomes like children's achievement.

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Each child was asked if he or she was in school; each child was individually tested for basic reading, arithmetic and writing skills. The local government primary school was also visited.

School observations include attendance of [teachers](#) and child-ren, and functioning of basic amenities. ASER 2005 has generated primary [data](#) on children's schooling and level of basic learning from about 10,000 villages, 200,000 households and over 330,000 children.

As many as 509 rural districts have participated in this effort, with over 700 local groups as partners. These groups include self-help groups, women's organisations, youth groups, well-known NGOs, local community-based organisations, college students and faculty from district colleges and universities.

This large-scale citizen parti-cipation in visiting villages and schools was supported mostly by individuals. On an average, Rs 12,000 have been spent per district for field work.

Data collection was completed in just over a month with a few additional weeks allotted for basic data analysis. Deputy chairman of the Planning Commission Montek Singh Ahluwalia will release the national report on January 17.

The government's mandate is to provide basic services. As citizens, we have the right and the responsibility to participate in the process that translates outlays into outcomes.

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