

Power to the People : Indicators for Accountability

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Abstract

In this article a definition of what constitutes “indicators” and “information” in the context of civil society has been delineated. A description of how a government-citizen partnership coupled with the Right to Information Act empowered the citizenry of New Delhi, the capital of India and promoted a climate of participatory democracy has been presented. The paper describes how the power of information could alter citizen’s lives and give them a public voice.

The article goes onto explore how in nearly half the 600 districts in India, the amalgamation of GIS maps and census data has enabled disparities and inequities in the provision of health services to be placed in the public domain, in a visual, easily downloadable fashion. This internet based indicator tool is aimed at enhancing the understanding of all stakeholders viz., the affected public, media, academic bodies and nongovernmental organizations who can use the information to augur change. As this represents the needs of almost 40% of a country of one billion people, the visual data based depiction is expected to widen understanding and increase public accountability.

The mechanism used for empowering the political and administrative authorities to use the indicators and information as a tool for management, has also been described in the article.

Participatory Democracy: How indicators gave power to the people

Statistical data, surveys, projections, extrapolations, portrayal of inequities through inter and intra regional mapping, the status of factors which influence a citizen’s quality of life are all vitally important as indicators. Generally however international organisations, Governments and statistical organizations provide the status of developments and the result of analysis through the release of reports, political speeches, press releases, seminars and discussions in which improvements (or lack of it) are projected. Couched in statistical terms they do not create an impact on the wider general public, because in their very nature such reports do not appear to relate directly to their concerns. Instead they are of use only to planners and academics working within specific sectors. Information constitutes material which is generally derived using the outcome of research, media sources or increasingly by the public using the Freedom of Information Acts. This has the shortcoming of presenting a misleading picture unless it is qualified properly. The general public is not well versed in appreciating nuances or using the information to demand better performance.

Against these presumptions, it is proposed to expound on two important developments which took place in New Delhi, the capital of India, which depict how

indicators and information empowered the public to hold government departments and even the political executive accountable.

Delhi is mega-city with a population of more than 14 million. Since, the city is divided into 7 parliamentary seats, 70 assembly constituencies and 272 municipal wards, political conflict and contending priorities are inherent in the situation. Being the seat of the central and state governments and with three levels of political representation, with 16 newspapers published from the city and a score of TV channels devoted to its affairs, it is a daunting situation for both political and administrative management. Arriving at a consensus is extremely difficult while pursuing government policies and in the absence of public participation, an unforeseen backlash can occur at any time, which can derail even good schemes and projects.

Since the political colour of the Members of Parliament, Members of Legislative Assembly and Municipal Councillors in New Delhi is generally different, the Government of Delhi needed to identify a way of involving the public directly, to create an understanding about who was responsible for what aspect of governance and service delivery. The government also realised the importance of giving the public a route to measure the responsiveness of the government to their concerns. Educating and involving the public was therefore of paramount importance for which they had to be first equipped with facts and data, information about processes, reporting levels and where responsibility for action finally lay. Likewise localised information on the performance of utilities, schools, hospitals and dispensaries, municipal services, upkeep of roads, parks etc. had to be made available to them to promote interest and involvement.

Bhagidari: A Government Citizen Partnership

Bhagidari in Hindi literally means partnership. This is an example how people's power catapulted over 3 levels of political representation and was responsible for the creation of more than 1800 Resident Welfare Associations in New Delhi in a span of 3 years from 2000. The movement grew in strength as the public became aware of the systems and processes through which Government organizations could be accessed and also became conversant with how the provision of services could be demanded, as due. Collaboration with the citizenry was fundamental to address the existing and future issues affecting their quality of life and therefore the partnership was of mutual interest.

The *Bhagidari* process began with the organisation of large group meetings with a wide range of stake-holders – resident's associations, market associations, school standards committees, environment friendly groups held at district and sub-district levels as citizen's problems are generally localised. At the Apex level, meetings were organised by rotation, district wise every 2 months for 3 days at a time, in a large hall where 36 tables were occupied by 12 persons at each table – six government representatives and six resident's representatives. During the 3 day conclave representatives at each table were give an opportunity to exchange lists of deficiencies and to listen to the response of the public servants about the theory of resolving civic problems. By the third day the macro picture emerged and senior officers of the government responded to the main issues. This exposed the Residents Welfare Committees representatives to the working of the government departments and also gave them information about the intra-colony status of services, the intra-district funding available, future priorities, programmes on the anvil and the basis on which decisions had been taken.

In response the citizen's representatives could differ with the organisation, question arbitrary decisions and also highlight instances of "pick-and-choose" and favouritism. They could raise issues of immediate concern to the neighbourhood and expect a positive response in the presence of the organisational hierarchy of officials.

The *Bhagidari* movement used newspapers, documentation, reports, awards and incentives and introduced systems for sharing lessons from failures and successes as instruments for generating momentum, expanding the support base and encouraging collaboration. The movement has now covered more than 3 million people and has helped create a network of associations which represent a large spectrum of citizens needs. Although they have no elected status, the Resident Welfare Associations have gained prominence and credibility because of their numbers and ability to leverage attention. From early initiatives which were localised, the movement spread to include more important subjects like electricity and water distribution, solid waste management. It jolted the ordinary citizen out from a state of helplessness to which he had become accustomed and created a public awakening that public services that needed to be demanded and obtained through collective action and effective interface with Government agencies. The fulcrum on which this movement rested was the empowerment of the association members with information.

The *Bhagidari* initiative received the United Nation's public service award for improving transparency, accountability and responsiveness to public service categories in 2005.

Human Development Report for Delhi

When the *Bhagidari* movement was in full swing it was decided to collect information for a Human Development Report (HDR) for Delhi city (the first city HDR in the world). An independent survey was commissioned which extended over 14,000 households in Delhi in 2003-04. The respondents were asked to provide their opinion on twelve different aspects of daily life which included education, health, water supply, power supply, sanitation, roads, transport facilities, state of the environment, livelihood, housing, women's status and safety and overall governance. The methodology of the survey gave due weightage to residents of eleven types of colonies which exist in the city ranging from posh up market colonies to slum clusters from rural and urban villages to the old walled city of Delhi, from Government housing, to self-promoted colonies on private land. The respondents had to comment on the performance of various sectors in terms of services offered to residents and also identify the most pressing problems that needed attention. While 82% of the residents wished to continue living in the city, their main complaints related to water supply, garbage disposal, traffic, high levels of crime and public transportation deficiencies. The collection of these indicators and zone wise display of survey results gave credibility to the process and provided a direct voice to the citizens in an organised way. It also provided a basis for making demands and holding the political representatives as well as the bureaucracy accountable. The Report was prepared by academics and experts in operational research which fortified the sincerity of approach and reliability about the results projected in the HDR.

The HDR survey results also gave strength to the Bhagidari initiative and increased public participation.

The Right to Information Act in Delhi

Side by side, the Delhi Right to Information Act was introduced in 2001 which further gave people the right to ask questions about governance, systems, processes and decisions. The introduction of the Right to Information law coupled with the *Bhagidari* movement brought to the fore the reluctance within the bureaucracy to open files to public scrutiny. Since the Act allowed citizens to inspect public records, documents and works and even take samples of work, NGOs in particular became quick to use the legislation in creative ways. Data on public distribution systems, the food stock position in warehouses

and its distribution showed that there was large scale diversion of essential commodities into the open market in some parts of the city. The Indian Express group of newspapers conducted a series of camps along with a local Non-government organisation based upon the information received. The Right to Information Act created an enabling environment because people were empowered to expose wrong doing and keep public servants under check and accountable. It gave people the direct authority to question what Government's organizations were expected to achieve and why there was an apparent shortfall in the outcomes.

Table 1

(Status of Applications received under the Delhi Right to Information Act, 2001 and Disposed off Upto March, 2007)

	Number of Applications		Information	
	Received	Disposed Off	Given	Not Given
Total	10921	10446	9477	969

Source : Department of Administrative Reforms, Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi.

How giving information can also derail decisions

The *Bhagidari* movement and the avenue of Right to Information worked as a bulwark for participatory democracy. The government in power was re-elected on the strength of giving the public a meaningful place in governance, but the fallout has to be viewed in its totality.

The Government had privatized electricity at a distribution end by 2002. The expectation was that this would improve efficiency. In 2005 when the public realized that electricity meters being supplied through private companies were running fast, and the electricity bills were spiraling, they rejected the electronic meters and began questioning the privatization process itself. Using the platform of *Bhagidari* and by demanding information under the Right to Information Act, non-government organizations used the information made available under the Act, to motivate the media and the public to raise issues which forced the government to abandon the proposed privatization of water distribution in the city, which was on the anvil. Information relating to power privatisation was used to draw attention to how expensive the decision to privatise water distribution could eventually become, thereby using the power of information to forestall a government decision that had already been taken. By exposing the inter and intra-city inequities in the supply of water and government's intention to hand over the problem to private distributors an uproar was created, involving the media, academic bodies and NGOs. The result has been that the privatization of water has been put off indefinitely because of people's capacity to impede the process, backed by data and information derived from knowledge of the system. This too was an outcome of the power gained under *Bhagidari* and the Right to Information Act.

Comment

For participatory democracy to be sustainable, there is no doubt the power has ultimately to be exercised through the ballot. Information can imbue a non-elected group of people with temporary power and authority to question government policies, schemes and the intention behind policies. The dilemma is that while civil society can exert countervailing pressure on the domination of the state and an exploitative market, once it begins to exercise authority it can also challenge democratically established institutions. The arbiter of what is right and wrong, important or unimportant, cost effective or

sustainable, if it is to be determined by the public at large, could have consequences on long term sustainability. Such civil society movements though powerful, have not been tested in the history of democratic countries. Never-the-less the power of information can make authoritarian system accountable which point is underscored through the preceding examples.

Enhancing Accountability through G. I. S. Mapping and Census Data.

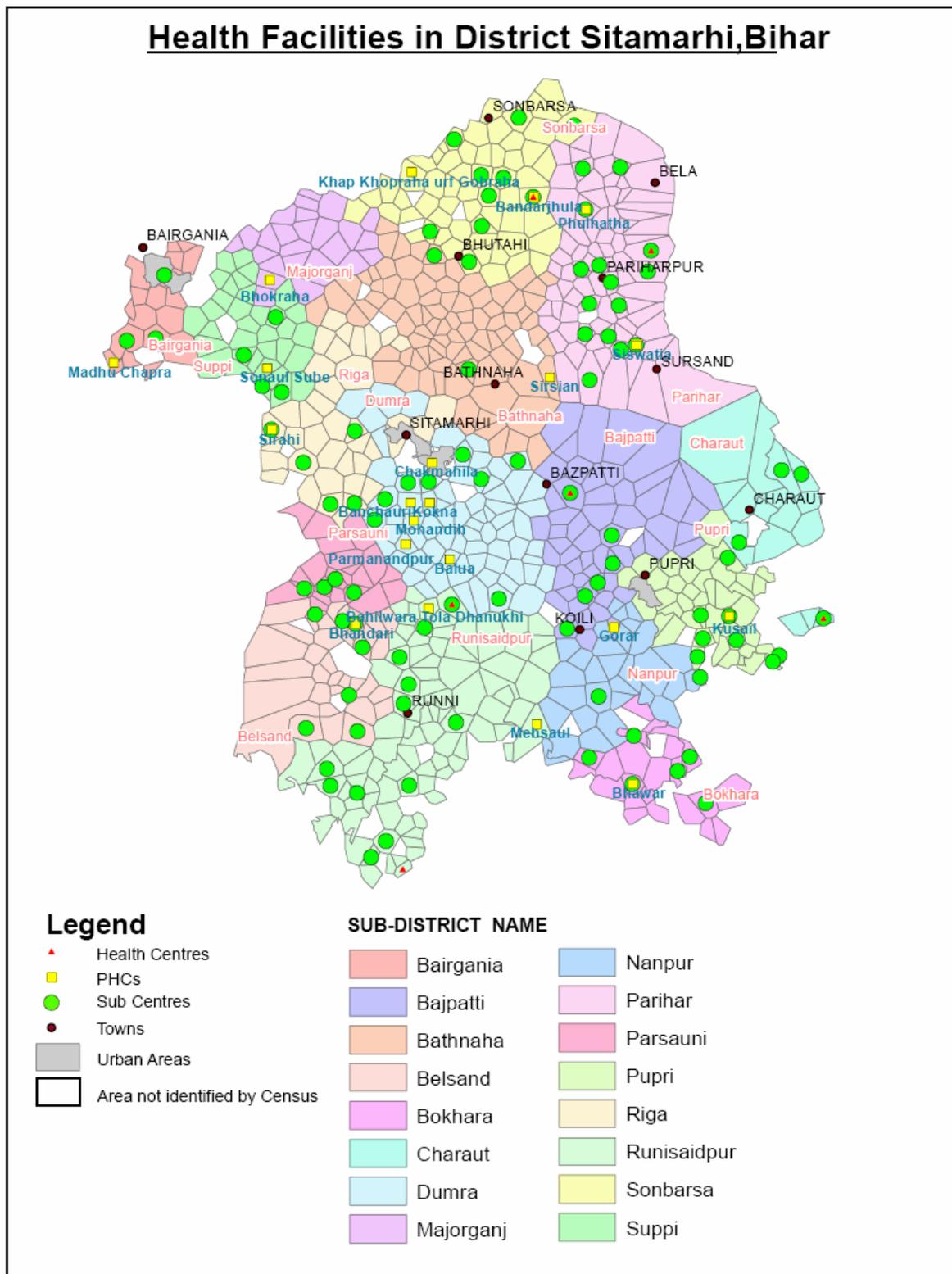
Population growth is one of India's biggest challenges. India is a second most populated country in the world sustaining almost 17% of the world population. The population of Indian state can be concerned to the population of many countries. Unlike Europe and North-America, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the entire South-East Asian region except China, India has the distinction of having an enormous growth of a young population for the next few decades. In comparative terms India is facing fewer challenges of dealing with an ageing population that many countries in the world face today. It can look forward to high productivity on account of a high proportion of the population belonging to the young cohort. By 2026, the population of India will rise by 371 million and share of 15-59 age group would be 64%. However, this cannot be an asset unless social indices like health, education, drinking water, sanitation improve side-by-side.

It was therefore felt that the provision of localised indicators and information could highlight larger issues and motivate Government authorities, the media and Non-Governmental Organizations to understand the bigger picture and what lies in store. There is every need to project statistical data in simple visual ways to empower the public. One of the most effective ways is to display inter and intra regional disparities through maps, graphs and charts in a way that is of direct interest at a local level.

Drawing Attention to Disparity - The Power of Comparative Analysis

In an effort to provide information to the public, the National Population Stabilisation Fund of India has prepared district and sub-divisional maps for 261 of the districts with low social indices out of 593 districts surveyed in the country. The choice of districts was made on the basis of statistical indicators, census data and GIS mapping. These maps projected not only the disparities in access to health facilities in respect of every sub-division of 261 selected districts but also provided information on the distance people have to travel to reach a health facility. This information was sent on CD to the Collector of the district, the Chairman of the District Development Committee, the member of the Legislative Assembly among others. The information highlights the inter and intra district differences and disparities in health facility coverage. The census data has been used to show the distance of a village from a primary health centre alongwith the population of each village living 5 kms. away, 5-10 Kms and more than 10 Kms. away from the health facilities. The GIS mapping has been used to display the clustering of health facilities and the presence of large underserved areas. The map shown in Figure 1 and the Distance chart at Figure 2 indicates the topography of the district, the clustering of facilities, the distances to be travelled.

Figure 1



Map composed by NIC
Source - RGI, SOI



Figure – 2

STATE :- Bihar

DISTRICT : Sitamarhi

Range from PHC's

0- 5kms

5-10Kms

More than 10Kms

Sub district	Village Name	Total Population	Village Name	Total Population	Village Name	Total Population
Bathnaha						
	Jogbana	1922	Shiunagar	766	Ranauli	2768
	Koriahi urf Kalyanpatti	3842	Bhilwahi	1997	Arazi Shahpur Sitalpatti	409
	Bindi Nowabad	1618	Chandpur	904	Matiar Khurd	1620
	Latipur	1467	Dumaria	1281	Bhagwanpur	2116
	Madhopur	1779	Sonbarsa Kumhra Sumer	1655	Simiahi	2302
	Bathanaha Jujharpatti	19287	Kishunpur Taufir	1815	Dewari Matauna	6639
	Kamal Dah	9510	Harnahia	3923	Chiraya	664
	Bhatha Harpur	10665	Kumargawan	1619	Bairaha	2660
	Kuari	1675	Jonka	1212	Phulparasi	2431
	Dostpur Khadauli	3756	Neyamutullahpur	647	Hariharpur	920
	Koili	3496	Bara	1399	Singrahia	2308
	Samhua	538	Kuari	1481	Supaina	1344
	Hanumannagar	1173	Bhamua	1483	Shahpur Sitalpatti	2489
	Chakni	1704	Surghahia	1882	Matiar Kalan	4125
	Terhia	1221	Lachhua	2176	Dharampur	1043
	Ghoghraha	1836	Maibi	1953	Barahijiwa	1349
	Sirsian	1830	Baghmari	1273	Majhaulia	3310
	Turkaulia	3193			Bhataulia	1817
	Warlahia	252			Kodarkat	1309
	Bokhri	1825			Bela	3748
	Pandaul urf Panthpakar	6291			Dighi	4965
	Rupauli Ruphara	3525			Harri	1524
					Bhikha Bishunpur Bhikha	843
					Mahuawa	2905
					Manaria	1273
					Madanpatti	960
					Purnahia	2035
					Neamatullahpur	123
					Gobardhanpur	1642
					Narha	3751
					Desti	3084
					Phulwaria	921
					Harkesh	198
					Narha Jagdarpi	1526
					Thithraha	273
					Sahiara	5109
					Singrahia	1496
					Mirijadpur	906
					Jhitkahia	2645
					Nizamuddinpur	617
					Dhubaha urf Dharaha	1768
					Madhubani	1757
					Bishunpur Pitambar	736
					Kodwara	1121
					Shahpur	2283

In 2006, the International Institute for Population Sciences in India released a report titled “Ranking and Mapping of Districts – Based on Socio-economic and Demographic Indicators”. The Report had given a composite Ranking to every district (See Table-2). This information was converted into bar charts and the ranking based of the district in terms of the composite index was made available for scrutiny on the same CD sent to the districts. The bar-charts shown in Figure 3 and 4 indicate the difference between the best performing and a low performing district within the same state. This is something people can relate to and raise questions about.

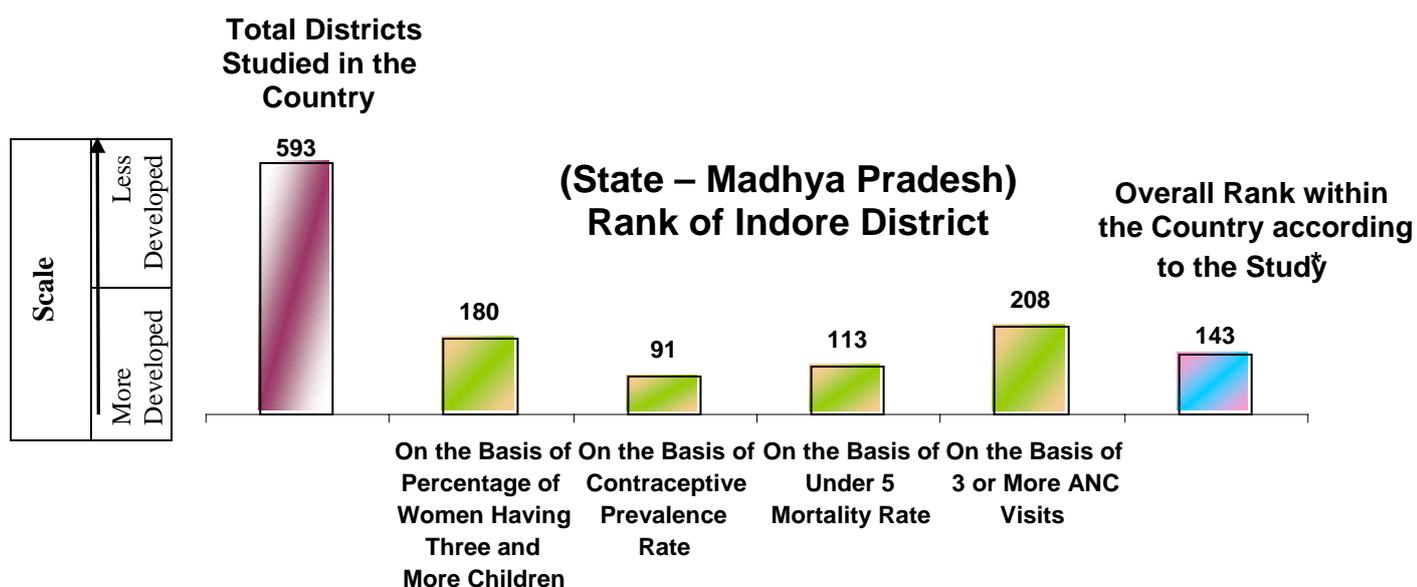
Table 2

(Indices covered in study “Ranking and Mapping of Districts” for Composite Ranking)

	Indices
1	Percentage of Population 0-6 Years
2	Birth Order Three And Above
3	Birth below Age 20
4	Complete Immunization Coverage
5	Dropout from Full Immunization
6	Female Literacy Rate
7	Households Using Safe Drinking Water
8	Households with Toilet Facility
9	Percentage of Electrified Households
10	Women Receiving 2 TT Injections
11	Women Receiving 3 or More ANC Visits
12	Under 5 Mortality Rate
13	Contraceptive Prevalence Rate
	Composite Index
	<i>(Composite Index is the average of the above 13 indices)</i>

Source: Ranking and Mapping of Districts, IIPS 2006.

Figure - 3

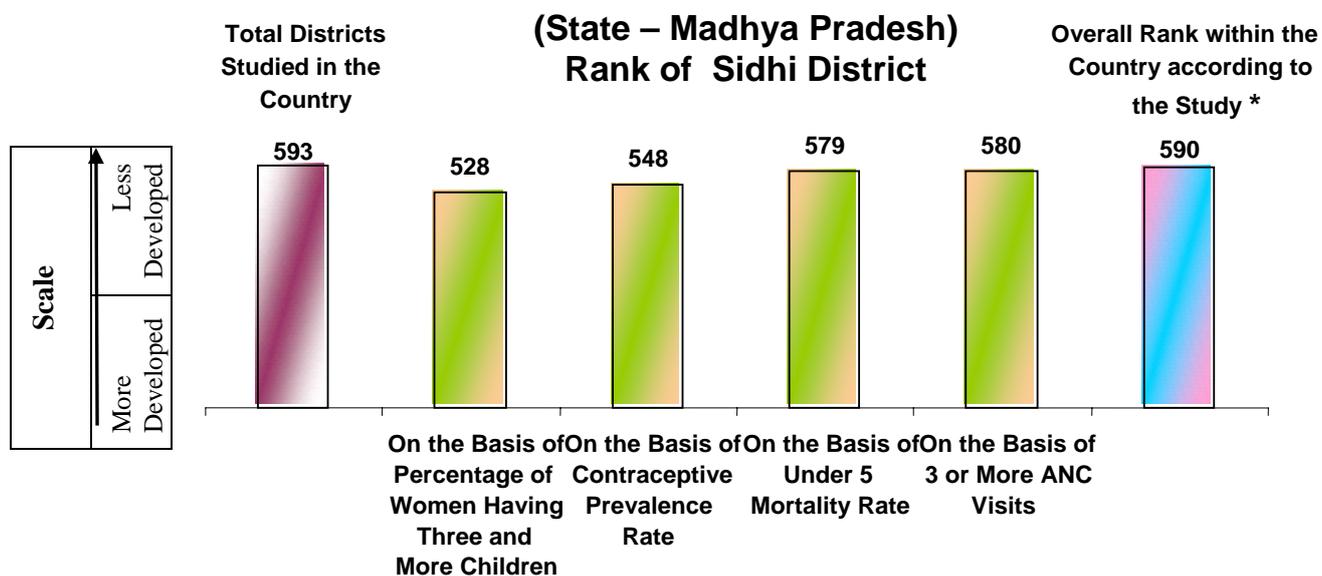


All districts have not been covered due to unavailability of data for some districts

Source: Ranking and Mapping of Districts, IIPS 2006 and DLHS-RCH State and Nutritional Report, 2006

* IIPS: **International Institute for Population Sciences**, Deonar, Mumbai, is an autonomous institution under the administrative control of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. It offers academic courses in the area of population studies.

Figure - 4



All districts have not been covered due to unavailability of data for some districts

Source: Ranking and Mapping of Districts, IIPS 2006 and DLHS-RCH State and Nutritional Report, 2006

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The National Population Stabilisation Fund has placed all this data on its website <http://jsk.gov.in> which can be accessed by media, research bodies and social science analysts. The organization is now publicising the availability of this information through national newspapers and magazines so that a wider group of stakeholders can access it.

The point to be underscored is that until now the availability of the data on health and social indices as well as the resident population was merely seen as statistical inputs. These have now been converted into visual form and made easily accessible on the website. This is expected to empower the public to question why the inter-district indices show so much variation and why availability of contraceptive services and accompanying health indices are better in certain districts as compared to others. It is expected that in planning new health facilities the underserved areas will get prominence.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that indicators and information can be used to empower the public to hold their policy makers accountable. Were it not for access to information and indicators, the *Bhagidari* initiative may not have been able to gain the leverage it gained in the context of empowering citizens of New Delhi.

It is also expected that the exercise undertaken by the National Population Stabilisation Fund to provide inter-state and intra-state, inter-district and intra district variations which highlight underserved districts, sub-districts and villages will lead to questions about low performance. Both the political executive as well as civil servants would be answerable for allowing low performance to continue. It would necessarily require infusion of funds for upgrading facilities and services since disparities would be evident down to every village. Since data as compiled by national organizations like the

Survey of India and the Registrar General of India has been used, complaints that it has been selectively compiled to credit or discredit any particular segment would not hold true.

Although such data has been available for decades, the difference now is that technology has enabled it to be displayed in visual form capable of being downloaded and lending itself to analysis even by a layperson. By improving access to information, leaders can keep themselves abreast of developments and have a basis to profess how they are promoting the quality of citizens life and how progress can be measured.

The process would also help international donors and external agencies to evaluate where critical gaps exist. The data can be used to focus on under-served areas so enabling the funding to be targeted properly.

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