

SDGs *vis-a-vis* Good Governance Practices: A Thin Line to be Erased

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It looks like the current world is abuzz with two terms – Good Governance and Sustainable Development Goals. Though the two words need no introduction, the need of the hour is definitely to link both the terms in planning our government policies and our schemes. To put it briefly, it is only when our Good Governance practices are aptly aligned with our SDGs does it create powerful synergies, thus making it holistic and truly sustainable. This paper tries to explore the need for such alignment. The paper delves on doing a case study on the good governance practices taken up in two government departments in Telangana viz GHMC and Prohibition and Excise Department, and how such practices resulted in a significant positive change. This paper aims to provide policy makers, civil servants, and academicians an insight into the need for alignment of SDGs with good governance practices and how such a synergy would achieve impactful change in our governments. It goes without saying that conflicting interactions between these two may produce diverging results. Aligning good governance practices with SDGs will help us not just realize our short-term goals, but foster an environment that is inclusive, equitable and sustainable.

Introduction

“Good Governance” is the buzzword in any government department these days. The World Bank defines the term as "the manner in which public officials and institutions acquire and exercise the authority to shape public policy and provide public goods and services" (World Bank 2007)^a.

Good Governance is quintessential in achieving the ideals of quality public services and stands on the foundation of any healthy democracy. The UNDP (1997: 2-3) defines governance as ‘the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels’, which ‘comprises mechanisms, processes and institutions

through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences’

On the other hand, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) called the Global Goals, framed by the United Nations, provide us with a comprehensive roadmap that has set certain goals to nations, countries, communities, and individuals to eradicate poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all. Consisting of 17 interlinked goals, the SDGs offer a holistic approach that encompasses a range of pressing issues, from ending poverty and hunger to promoting quality education, gender equality, and sustainable economic growth. By accepting the SDGs, the member nations accept to dedicate themselves to these goals and strive to achieve them by bringing in whatever policy necessary, by making changes and implementing them.

The SDGs came into force on 01st January 2016 after the historic UN summit held in New York on 25th September 2015. These goals are aimed at transforming the lives and livelihoods of people across the globe. The concept of “Good Governance” was introduced much earlier. The World Bank introduced this concept in its 1992 report titled "Governance and Development". According to this document, good governance is an essential complement to sound economic policies and is central to creating and sustaining an environment which fosters strong and equitable development. Accordingly, 'Good Governance Index' was launched in India in 2019 by the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, Ministry of Personnel (DARPG), Public Grievances and Pensions, Government of India. It is a uniform tool across states to assess the Status of Governance and the impact of various interventions taken up by the state governments and Union Territories. It looks at providing quantifiable data to compare governance in all states and UTs, by taking into consideration ten sectors viz 1) Agriculture and Allied Sectors, 2) Commerce & Industries, 3) Human Resource Development, 4) Public Health, 5) Public Infrastructure & Utilities, 6) Economic Governance, 7) Social Welfare & Development, 8) Judicial & Public Security, 9) Environment and 10) Citizen-Centric Governance.

Good governance initiatives seem more local, in the sense that they are limited to a certain organization or to a certain community. They seem more short term, without any long-term goal attached. On the other hand, SDGs seem more global, with a tangible objective attached to every goal. For example, when we say SDG1, our goal is to end Poverty - across nations and thereby across the globe. One very creative approach started by the

Vietnamese has been using SIPAS (Satisfaction Index of Public Administrative Services) since 2018, to measure people's satisfaction with administrative services.

Objectives

The objective of this paper is to understand and compare initiatives taken by two government departments - the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) and the Telangana State Prohibition and Excise Department. We will be looking at the policy decisions that were taken to enable the implementation of good governance practices, their primary objectives and their ultimate impacts. We point towards the seemingly well-thought-out but actually random developmental initiatives undertaken by GHMC and the P&E Department.

We will analyse if the decisions could have been planned better, by making them as pieces of a bigger picture plan instead of random initiatives aimed at achieving short-term or piece-meal goals.

Methodology

This paper adopts a Case Study approach to understand the good governance practices taken up in these two departments viz GHMC and the P&E Department.

Case Study 1: GHMC

The Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) is a municipal governing body responsible for administering and governing the city of Hyderabad, which is the capital of the state of Telangana. GHMC, initially known as Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad, is responsible for the local administration and urban development in Hyderabad. Officially formed on April 16, 2007, GHMC is responsible for handling the development and governance of one of the leading metropolitan cities of India and the world.

GHMC took a major initiative on the 11th of November, 2014 - almost a decade ago - to make all transactions, file movements and citizen-centric activities online and paperless. Since then it has been a major success, with almost 80% of all the interactions, whether with citizenry, intra-department or with other government departments, have become paperless. In the digital era, GHMC's B2B, B2C and B2G communication has more or less become digitalised now.

For instance, the GHMC issues Birth Certificates to the new-borns in the Greater Hyderabad area. This used to be a very laborious and time-consuming process earlier, with the parents having to physically go to one of the GHMC circle offices and apply for the birth certificate. Then the concerned section clerk would start the current file and after approval by the concerned authority the birth certificate would be issued after approximately 8 working days.

Now with this process being made online, there have been benefits like almost an instant issuing of the certificate within a day and with no running around offices. But the major factor has been the saving of paper. Every physical file used to consume at least 6 papers plus the certificate, which was a huge cost on the environment. With roughly 1.9 lakh births happening in GHMC area last year, there would have been a consumption of close to 15 lakh papers. With these paperless transactions and the resultant saving of paper, countless trees have been saved, and minimised carbon footprint has also been recognised as an important aspect of sustainable good governance.

Case Study 2: Prohibition and Excise Department, Govt of Telangana

The Prohibition and Excise Department (P&E) is a uniform department which is under the Revenue department of the Government of Telangana. The department has two major and primary tasks - to enforce the strict implementation of licensed liquor and not allow any Non-Duty Paid Liquor (NDPL) and Gudumba, and to control substances banned under Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) act. The department also has a huge role in collecting revenue for the state exchequer in the form of allotting liquor licenses to shops, bars, clubs, and tourism clubs. And also, to collect revenue from distilleries and breweries.

For doing these multifaceted operations, the department has about 4000 strong workforce with able women and men performing different roles and responsibilities. As in many organisations, the P&E Department also never laid too much emphasis on gender parity until about a few years ago.

In 2009, the department started to bring in the much-needed thrust on recruiting women in a strong manner. A minimum of one-third ($1/3^{\text{rd}}$) women are to be recruited at all the 3 stages of hierarchy i.e. the Constabulary, Sub Inspector and Assistant Excise Superintendent stages, and that has become a mandatory norm. With these measures, the

strength of women in the department before 2009 was less than 700 and it has now shot up to more than 1500.

It is not just about numbers but about the women at different levels who are working in important decision-making posts which gives a whole new level of holistic approach and attitude to the major tasks performed by the department. The department is able to control crime to a greater extent, and has also resulted in the attainment of the objective of increasing revenue collection year after year.

Findings

Case Study 1:

When we talk of the good governance practices taken up by GHMC, the idea of a paperless office or an e-office is appealing. The objective was to reduce the usage of paper in a phased manner. However, the objective could have had far reaching results had it been linked to the SDGs. The SDG that deals with the said objective precisely is SDG 12^c i.e., Responsible Consumption and Production. It is not just enough to reduce paper usage in the office.

Minimizing electronic waste and energy consumption will not just make the practice holistic but also promote the culture of sustainability. Here comes the core idea of tying together our good governance practices with SDGs. Advancing and advocating the SDG practices through our Good governance practices is what will add a core meaning to our policy changes, which in turn will advance our institutions to be the forerunners on the global map.

Listed below are the SDG sub targets which can be met comfortably, by a more holistic attempt at realizing a truly sustainable paperless office -

Target 12.2 - Sustainable management and use of Natural Resources

Target 12.5 – Substantially reduce waste generation

Target 12.6 - Encourage companies to adopt sustainable practices and sustainability reporting

Target 12.7 – Promote sustainable public procurement practices

Target 12.8 - Promote universal understanding of sustainable lifestyles

Target 12.9 - Support developing countries' scientific and technological capacity for sustainable consumption and production

Target 12.A - Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable tourism

Target 12.B - Remove market distortions that encourage wasteful consumption

The following practices and their consequences were observed in the working of GHMC as an organisation, and in correlation with other government bodies, as part of this study:

1. Lack of uniformity of measures: Uniformity of measures across the departments will ensure that any sustainable initiative taken up by GHMC is not short lived in reaching its intended target. For example, acceptance of e-birth certificates across various other government departments is mandatory if the purpose of reducing paper usage is to be attained, which is the goal behind GHMC issuing e-birth certificates. Because, as is the case now, if this does not happen, then one has to again produce a physical copy of the birth certificate which makes the entire effort futile. This will ensure that the progress that happens in one department is not dampened by the slower pace of progress in other departments.
2. Better planning to link the objectives: Many administrative decisions are taken in the GHMC, which, at the outset, are commendably debated and are aimed at solving the immediate problems like reducing paper waste or to arrive at short term targets like having a fully digitised office. But there is still much scope for correlation among the decisions - both at the planning stage and in the implementation stage.
3. Data retrieval system: When aiming to set up an e-office, which is understandably the ultimate target of any office going paperless, the most important and the primary task would be to set up a fool-proof data retrieval system. It includes the systematic storing of voluminous data. As we see, government offices and workers are regularly required to refer to older circulars, older files and older orders. Referring to such content must be made seamless, simple and cost-effective.
4. Training the staff: This comes as the most important step in ensuring that the department is not forced to move back to a normal office. There is still a perceivable gap between the present skill set of the government workers, and the skills that they are expected to have, to become sustainable. Staff at all levels are required to be equipped with skills to use the electronic gadgets newly introduced in the offices, to

store and retrieve information and also to provide necessary information to the citizens quickly.

5. Responsible recycling of e-waste: As we move to a paperless office, it is imperative that our dependence on electronics items and electricity would be manifold. The perception has not evolved to the extent that electricity is also generated using non-renewable natural resources. And also about the amount of natural resources that are required in manufacturing a single piece of electronic item and its shelf life and its disposal. If in the veil of going paperless we do not efficiently evaluate all our alternative resources and their optimal management, then we may not be doing justice by calling the whole thing 'Sustainable'.

Case study 2:

The good governance practice of deciding to increase the women workforce in the P & E department is a welcome move. The SDG 5 that talks about Gender Equality and the SDG 10 which talks about Reduced Inequalities are the relevant SDGs to this administrative decision. However, mere increase in the number of women in the department will not serve the purpose.

The following mechanisms were observed to have been in practice in the P&E department as part of this study -

1. The share of women recruitees has gone up significantly when compared to the previous proportions, crossing an increase of 100% from 2009. But the recruitment processes, training modules and classes largely remained the same, without giving sufficient focus on the possible changes that may be necessary in the training to ably cater to the skill gaps and the different skillsets of women trainees as compared to the average male trainees from before 2009.
2. There is still a lot of gap that needs to be bridged, in adapting to the necessities that the women staff bring. For example, there is a need for easier facilitation of maternity leaves and a necessity to remove the stigma attached to it, and in providing creche facility for toddlers so that recruitees who are new mothers would not constantly worry about the wellbeing of their children and can give their best when it came to workload.

3. There is still a need for a more holistic and more dynamic Standard Operating Procedures, when it comes to ably addressing the problems that arise at the workplace. For instance, if an employee has any genuine issue with other workers or has a sexual harassment complaint towards a colleague, they will feel more comfortable and empowered to work, if there is a system in place which is sufficiently empathetic towards their grievances.
4. Training and Education: There is a need to provide better training and educational opportunities to empower women with the skills needed for leadership positions, besides establishing mentorship and sponsorship programs to support women's career development and advancement.
5. Anti-Discrimination Policies: Anti-discrimination policies can be enforced better, and further training ought to be provided to raise awareness about biases and harassment in the workplace.
6. Awareness Campaigns: Awareness campaigns should be held within the organization to educate employees about the importance of gender equality and the benefits it brings to everyone. Care should also be taken to provide an open and accessible platform to discuss gender related issues.
7. There is still a necessity to offer more flexible work hours and remote work options to accommodate employees' needs - particularly to women with caregiving responsibilities.
8. Since it is a uniform service, women joining back work after maternity leave may often feel overwhelmed to come back to work in uniforms. There are unexpressed apprehensions about fitness and most importantly about the mindset. Not every woman may be equally equipped to take up the job with the same flair again. Awareness and motivation campaigns or consults maybe initiated to boost the morale of such employees, thus increasing their productivity.

Conclusion

SDGs are still looked at like they're elite concepts, attaining which is falsely thought to require a complete overhaul of the standard operating procedures. But, the enumeration and sub categorisation of SDGs is done to the tiniest detail which enable us to understand the minutiae of the goals' operation. Even a small new sustainable administrative measure that a

department undertakes can help us progress further along the path of realising any of the SDG goals or sub target. It is in this context that a systemic intertwining of Good Governance practices and SDGs is timely, as Telangana establishes itself as a leading state in India despite being only a decade in existence.

Aligning good governance practices with the SDGs fosters an environment where development is not only about achieving immediate outcomes but also about creating sustainable, equitable, and enduring improvements that benefit current and future generations. It ensures that development efforts are transparent, accountable, participatory, and inclusive, thereby maximizing their impact and creating a better world for all.

An inalienable part of Good Governance is the active role of people by themselves or via various civil society organisations. This role should be made more informed and interactive, by educating the citizen stakeholders about SDGs and their targets. This can lead to a healthy mutualism and symbiosis between the two seemingly unrelated paths of Good Governance and SDGs.

Telangana Government has done departmental mapping of SDG goals as far back as in 2017. The Planning Department in the state government is the nodal agency for ensuring implementation of the SDGs in the State and coordinating on SDGs. All line Departments are made responsible for implementing the programmes as mapped with the SDGs^d. Overall connectivity across departments may be ensured which will help make even small administrative decisions synchronous with the state government's Departmental mapping of SDGs. This can be made possible by appointing full-time liaisons in each department, whose job would be to fine-tune even the small administrative measures taken, so that all the Good Governance decisions actually contribute to the bigger goal of attaining SDGs. These liaisons may be domain experts who are well-versed with SDGs and the multifaceted nuances therein. Constant and consistent supervision of all government departments by a singular department, like the Planning Department, helps achieve uniformity of progress across the horizontal landscape of the government. So that the good or the progress that happens in one department will not need to be undone by the slower pace of progress in other departments.

An inadvertent consequence of technological advancement is the digitalisation of documents and paper trails which were hitherto manual. This necessitates the possession of sufficient digital infrastructure to ensure the safe storage of valuable and often sensitive government paperwork. By making this infrastructure as simple to use as we possibly can, we

can arrive at a smoother and a more sustainable transition to digital workspaces in the government.

Upskilling sessions and capacity building workshops should be periodically conducted for all the government personnel, to train them and educate them about the changes that are intended by the government through any new administrative decisions taken. This will help them get accustomed with the changing expectations in the work culture in the offices, thereby making sure that the employees wouldn't feel the need to resort to the earlier, less sustainable way of working which they're more accustomed to.

Any attempt by the government to willingly change the demographic configuration of the workforce in the government, to ensure adequate representation of historically or socially disadvantaged groups like women, should be followed by mandatory skill training sessions. This measure will help bridge the skill gap that this group of workers may unavoidably have, owing to their social position.

Being open and adaptive to the changing necessities that the increased role and proportion of women in government workspaces bring is of paramount importance to ensure a sustainable transition. Dynamic and evolving Human Resource practices like maternity leaves and period leaves, and installing creche facilities at offices should be adopted to make the workspaces equitably accessible to all.

Grievance Redressal Mechanisms in place should be further strengthened, and should be empowered to take periodic feedback from the employees and to undertake dynamic redressal of issues or complaints. For instance, in the event of a possible Sexual Harassment complaint in any department, the complainant should be aware of and be confident in the systemic procedure that they should follow to lodge their complaint. This will give all the employees the necessary confidence that in case of any future grievance, the system has in place a standard medium of grievance redressal.

All the aforementioned measures are necessary to actually realise the goal of women empowerment, which was the reason to increase the role of women in the P&E department in particular and in all government departments in general, through the horizontal reservation. Without such systemic changes, the increased recruitment of women into the government will just be a symbolic gesture or token measure.

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