

THE ABCDEF OF IMPLEMENTATION

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Government policies & interventions for development in various Sectors and issues arising out of their design & implementation incl. Housing

The proverb “the proof of the pudding is in the eating” perfectly summarises this government’s delivery first approach to governance — the policy of implementation. Governments have always focused on designing the right policies and development schemes. However, over the years, many such well-designed schemes failed to make a significant dent on the lack of access to basic services that a large proportion of our population faced. While the focus on design and policy architecture may have been well meaning, there may not have been a strong enough focus on ensuring that these policies translate to effective implementation on the ground.

A prime minister in the 1980s had famously said that of every rupee spent by the government, only 15 paise reached the intended beneficiaries. This statement symbolised the skew in emphasis on “policy” in favour of “implementation”.

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This government has attempted to change things. There has been a relentless emphasis on taking all schemes to fruition on the ground, with the final delivery being the only metric of success. In the past five years, rural India has seen a massive transformation in access to basic services like electricity, cooking fuel, toilets, houses and bank accounts. These transformations have been at unprecedented scale and speed. The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), in particular, has achieved what no one gave it a chance of achieving when it was audaciously announced by the prime minister during his first Independence Day address from the Red Fort. The journey has thrown up six important guiding principles which can be applied to any large transformation scheme — the ABCEDF of implementation.

A — Align: Different people at different positions may have competing priorities. A goal congruence has to be achieved across the administrative ecosystem. After the PM announced the SBM, the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation had to ensure that the same message percolated down to the chief ministers, 700 district collectors and 2,50,000 sarpanches. This was achieved through a continuous engagement with the states. Team SBM-Grameen visited each state multiple times and also engaged directly with district collectors through learning workshops, informal gatherings and WhatsApp groups, ensuring that sanitation remained on top of everyone’s agenda. The three layers of the PM-CM-DM model working in cohesion is the first and most important step towards policy translating into real delivery.

B — Believe: Often when faced with a seemingly unsurmountable goal, teams that don’t genuinely believe that the goal can be achieved find themselves not motivated enough, and hence not trying hard enough and not achieving results — a self-fulfilling prophecy. The next important step was building a team of people who believed that the goal is achievable. Younger people with fresh perspective and lesser administrative baggage believe more easily and focus on finding creative solutions. The SBM brought in a unique blend of young professionals and experienced but driven bureaucrats, at the centre and in the states, and each person quickly became a believer.

C — Communicate: At its core, the SBM is a behaviour change programme. Communication at all levels, above and below the line, mass and inter-personal, was fundamental to the SBM. An army of trained grassroots volunteers called Swachagrahis were created, who went from door to

door to communicate the message of swachhata. And then the SBM attempted to make sanitation glamorous by engaging extensively with the media, leveraging popular culture, and associating Bollywood stars, sportspersons and other influencers to promote the message of sanitation. And lastly, the Mission kept the buzz alive throughout its life-cycle through regular, large-scale events with the PM at important milestones, helping sanitation stay on top of public recall. A recent study by Dalberg estimated that each rural Indian was reached by SBM messaging about 3,000 times over the past five years. Such was the effectiveness of SBM's communication. Of course, we had a big advantage — the PM was our Communicator-in-Chief!

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D — Democratise: As the prime minister has said on many occasions, the SBM became a Jan Andolan. It nudged people to realise that sanitation is not an individual good, but a community good, as its full benefits accrue only when it is universal. Over the years, everyone became a stakeholder and sanitation became everyone's business. People constructed their own toilets and motivated others, communities planned activities and monitored progress, villages declared themselves open defecation free (ODF). Even corporates, NGOs, civil society organisations and other government ministries and departments played a role in mainstreaming sanitation.

E — Evaluate: The SBM was operating at a massive scale in a largely decentralised manner. As progress started surpassing expectations, many people questioned the veracity of official administrative progress figures. And hence, it became even more important to encourage third-party monitoring of progress and evaluate outputs, outcomes and impacts to reinforce the credibility and keep the implementers motivated. At the same time, pockets of excellence emerged which deserved to be studied and shared with others to replicate. Organisations such as the World Bank, UNICEF, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and WHO conducted various assessments of sanitation coverage and usage, successes and areas of improvement, as well as the health, economic and social impacts of the SBM. India became the global laboratory for sanitation. Lessons from these studies were incorporated into the programme in real-time.

F — Follow-through: The PM said on October 2 while commemorating the ODF declaration by all states that this is but a milestone and not the finish line. There is a strong focus on not declaring "mission accomplished", and continuing to work towards sustaining the ODF behaviour and ensuring that no one is left behind. We recently released a forward-looking 10-year sanitation strategy, articulating the goal of moving from ODF to ODF Plus. This post-delivery follow through is a critical to ensure that the change becomes the norm and that things don't reset to what they used to be in the past. Only then will the delivery be truly complete.

Learning from these guiding principles, the government is continuing in its quest to deliver basic services to the people of India. In his first Independence Day speech of his second term, the prime minister announced an even more ambitious goal — of providing piped water supply to all households by 2024. And aligning with this goal, the Jal Jeevan Mission is being designed to deliver, based on the ABCDEF of implementation.

The writer is secretary, Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Ministry of Jal Shakti. Views are personal

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