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What does it mean to empower informationally the local government!—designing an information system for a district level development administration ☆

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Abstract

An information system that empowers information agents having a stake in the development of a district government is discussed in this research. It analyses the case of a district administration in India who has implemented a browser based system. This system has information asymmetry and organisational capture as its goals; and it employs a few structural elements such as an incentive scheme for information generation, an auction scheme for selecting projects based on the best information offer, etc. It is argued that such a system is rational. These principles are novel, and it encourages a grass root governance that cannot be captured through simple schema of decentralisation. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Informational empowerment; Information systems; Development administration; Organisational capture

1. Introduction

The distinct characteristics of governance through government have not often been recognised while delivering technological solutions to its functioning, structure and purposes. A government is not an industrial organisation. Designing and implementing a computerised information system (IS) for a government and for its departments cannot follow the course taken by the methods and techniques adopted for systems analyses, design and implementation of IS for a private organisation (Banerjee, 2000). Attempts toward constructing general theories of organisation (Tirole, 1994) in order to find common denominators to government departments (GD) and an

☆ Editor's note: because of the large number of abbreviations used in this paper a short glossary has been placed at the end of the article as a Appendix A.

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industrial organisation have remained limited in scope. GD in developing countries, in particular its development administration (DA), exhibit characteristics such as poorly developed interest-group structures, that constrain the use of such a generalised approach. Moreover, technological solutions such as development of IS cannot be based solely on the generalised considerations of organisational principles. Attempts to developing IS for the GD and the DA was appreciated as a rather complex task, and it remained limited to a few design principles, namely 'decentralisation', 'planning', 'implementation authority' (Mohamed & Appalanaidu, 1998; Bhatnagar, 2000; Heeks, 1998). This present research based as it is upon the field-study conducted in a district of India and on data collected on IS in Indian government structures, contends however, that design notions of 'decentralisation', or of 'equal access to information', are if not inappropriate at least extremely limited in explanatory power and in normative considerations. It argues that the IS of a DA has to informationally empower all the agents who have a stake in this DA, and this goal can be fulfilled if the system is rational.

IS for the district level DA, we argue, allowed the local elites a fair degree of share in power and in local autonomy. However, this autonomy of the district elites does not usher in an autonomy for the villages or for the blocks (of a large number of villages—the lowest level of government). The district, we have studied, has developed a browser-based IS and GIS applications, enabling it to link up with any other national or international entities. The central and the state government still retains its administrative control through the IS for the treasury and for law and peace, which do not come under the district DA. The IS of district DA and of other central/state departments (GD) can be compared in terms of a set of design principles. These principles, we derive from organisational theory of agency/incentives and we examine their efficacy in terms of their explanatory power.

According to these principles, an IS should provide for incentives to generate information, to enable auctioning of development projects based on competitive status of information, to encourage information asymmetry, to enable the possibility of organisational capture and to provide for distributed control rights. The case of a browser based IS for the district shows that the principal goal of this IS remains informational empowerment of all the agents. An IS can be defined as rational if it empowers informationally all the agencies and if it enables the agencies to fulfill their several goals through the use of such information. In order to fulfill the goal of informational empowerment, the district IS has assumed the surrogate goals of information asymmetry and organisational capture. Moreover, these design considerations are normative as well and hence these can be employed for designing new IS and for benchmarking the existing IS. It is observed that the district IS case is significantly different from the IS in other GD. Finally, we argue that this district IS case is a unique refutation of common assumptions, held by most researchers, relating to information asymmetry, organisational capture, decentralisation, and competitive usages of information.

The plan of the paper is as follows: Section 2, describes the set-up of a district DA, situating it in the milieu of the Indian GD, and analyses the types of information required by it for purposes of planning and governance. In Section 3, borrowing from our earlier work and from the research by theorists of organisation and governance, we analyse the importance of the design considerations and principles adopted here. Next, in Section 4, the case of a particular district, the district of Burdwan, is discussed from the perspective of the browser-based system that has been designed for them. Section 5 discusses, in terms of the design principles this district IS and

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