41ˢᵗ WEDC International Conference, Egerton University, Nakuru, Kenya, 2018

TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE
AND RESILIENT WASH SERVICES

Can direct benefit transfer strengthen the Swachh Bharat Mission? Learnings from three districts in Madhya Pradesh, India

K. Singh, V. R. Raman & A. Hueso (India)

PAPER 2978

In order to address some of the challenges faced in implementation of Indian government's flagship program Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin), the Madhya Pradesh state government introduced the direct benefit transfer of incentives to beneficiary households in 2016. This system uses an android application and web portal for digitizing the processes, resulting in direct transfer of toilet construction incentives into beneficiaries' bank accounts. The paper is based on a study which brings out the experiences of the direct benefit transfer model, based on field research in 3 districts of Madhya Pradesh. Findings indicate that the system has resulted in improved monitoring, efficiency and transparency; as well as reduction in scope for corruption. However a few bottlenecks were observed including process gaps, community access, capacity building, equity and ethical considerations. The paper also brings out the key enablers for effective implementation of the model in large-scale government programs.

Introduction

Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) is the flagship program of the Indian government, with the aim of achieving universal sanitation coverage in the nation. Launched in 2014, it comprises of two sub-missions, the Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) and Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban) for rural and urban areas respectively. Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin), aims at achieving a clean and Open Defecation Free (ODF) India by 2nd October, 2019, with the major objective being acceleration of sanitation coverage in rural areas. The program focuses on generating demand for toilets leading to their construction by individual households and sustained use by all the household members, along with promoting better hygiene behaviour and solid and liquid waste management in villages. An amount of INR 12,000 (USD 187 approximately) is provided as an incentive to each eligible household, upon the completion of construction (MDWS, 2017). This incentive, if delivered timely and efficiently, can help in cases where affordability is a barrier, especially among poor and disadvantaged households, thereby giving a push to toilet construction in rural areas.

Although the program has brought nation-wide momentum to promoting universal sanitation, challenges such as false reporting, corruption (Dipankar, 2017) and delays in incentive delivery (Wadhavan, 2017) have been reported in a number of states, thereby affecting its progress. These challenges have been a common characteristic of large scale government programs in India, especially those involving incentives or payments to citizens (Afridi, 2017). Traditionally toilet construction in India has been driven by the gram panchayats (GPs), the village-level governments, and has been prone to corruption, poor quality toilets (WaterAid, 2017) and lack of ownership among the community members (IDS et al., 2017).

In order to address these challenges and streamline the incentive delivery in SBM-G, in 2016, the government of Madhya Pradesh state introduced the direct benefit transfer (DBT). In India, DBT had been introduced in various large scale central and state government programs, its success being complemented by the government's push to promote financial inclusion in the nation (Chowdhary, 2014). Through DBT, the government enables an electronic transfer of payments directly to the beneficiaries' bank accounts.

The Direct Benefit Transfer Model in Madhya Pradesh SBM-G

The Madhya Pradesh state government has provided every household with a unique ID called the Samagra ID. The households' details such as name, address, mobile number and bank account details are linked to its Samagra ID. Usually, this process of mapping household details with Samagra ID is done by the Gram Panchayat (GP) functionaries[1].

The MP government has designed a system wherein a household can check its eligibility status by entering its Samagra ID, using a mobile-based android application (Swachh MP app) or a web portal (Swachh MP portal). Eligible households, upon completing the construction, can apply for the incentive using the same mobile app or portal. For verification of these applications, a supervisor, usually a panchayat or block level government functionary is appointed for every GP, and is given a unique login ID. The supervisor takes a geo-tagged photo of complete toilets, meeting the quality standards and uploads it in the Swachh MP mobile app. The block coordinator prepares an e-payment order for each eligible application, which is then forwarded to the bank for initiating the incentive transfer. There is a single bank account at the state government level, from which the incentive is transferred to the bank account mapped to the household's Samagra ID.

The Swachh MP portal and mobile app have a provision wherein the application status can be tracked at each stage by staff as well as the household itself, by entering the household Samagra ID. One can check the date and time when each step was completed, along with the name of government official involved at each stage.

The incentive can be transferred in one full instalment of INR 12000, or in two equal instalments of INR 6000 each, upon completion of substructure and superstructure respectively.

Research methodology

The research studied the experience of the direct benefit transfer model and online monitoring system in Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) in the state of Madhya Pradesh, and analyzed its initial successes and challenges.

The study involved a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods. It involved fieldwork in three districts of Madhya Pradesh- Ashoknagar, Tikamgarh and Alirajpur. The district selection was done in consultation with the state government, trying to ensure diversity in terms of geographical and demographic conditions and DBT coverage.

The study involved i) review of state-level policy documents; ii) key informant interviews of the state, district, block and panchayat level officials, as well as some community members; and iii) a household survey of community members having a toilet, including households which had and had not availed the incentive. For the household survey, two blocks were selected in each district, and 4 gram panchayats were selected in each of these blocks. 24 households were selected in each of these gram panchayats, thus making the survey sample size across three districts 576 (192 households per district). To reduce bias, blocks and panchayats were selected in a way that captured variations in terms of distance from district headquarter.

Key findings

Successes

Greater efficiency in incentive delivery

The previous system of incentive transfer involved a number of intermediaries at GP, block and district levels. All the activities such as application, verification, approval and payment involved paperwork. Thus the entire process from application to payment usually took 1-3 months. The direct benefit transfer system has reduced this time significantly. As reported by the household survey respondents, the average time between the verification of toilets and withdrawal of money from bank account is 14.2 days. Streamlining of the incentive transfer process has not only reduced the workload on government officials, but also reduced the financial burden on households which invest in toilet construction, often with the help of loans.

Improved monitoring and accountability

The provision of uploading geo-tagged photos of constructed toilets in the mobile app has helped in strengthening the online monitoring system, by reducing the scope for false reporting and duplication. The quality of constructed toilets can be checked at the block level through the geo-tagged photos uploaded in the web portal, before the payment is approved. Names of government officials involved in each activity are

also reflected in the portal, along with the date of activity completion. Supervisors are required to complete verification of toilets within 7 days of application, and action may be taken by the administration in case of unwarranted delays. This monitoring system makes it possible to identify delays, mis-reporting and duplication; and take corrective action accordingly. Robust monitoring and improved accountability is a major achievement for a government sanitation program of this scale.

Improved transparency

The Swachh MP portal and mobile app make it possible for the beneficiaries to check their eligibility as well as their application status online. If required, a beneficiary can lodge a complaint by calling the CM helpline[2]. This is a step towards making the program more transparent and citizen-centric.

Reduced scope for corruption

Corruption in the form of bribes and misappropriation is a challenge which limits the impact of many government schemes, and leads to mis-utilization of public funds. DBT system has reduced the number of intermediaries between the government and beneficiaries of the program. The incentive is directly transferred into bank accounts of the beneficiaries, thus minimizing the scope for corruption by government officials.

Challenges

Process gaps

Gaps in process checks were observed in critical activities; such as entering bank details of households, and verification of constructed toilets. At times the makers and checkers[3] of these tasks were same, thereby providing scope for manipulation and conflict of interest. Also, while the system records the date, time, person involved in the verification process, there is lack of clarity on how he/she would be held accountable in case of manipulation/delays.

Community awareness, capacities and ownership

Only 7% of the household survey respondents owned an android phone, which means that 93% of the respondents could not access the Swachh MP mobile app directly. For all respondents, the application was completed by the gram panchayat functionaries on the households' behalf. None of the respondents were aware which medium was used for their application, while only 0.35% respondents were aware of the provision of tracking incentive online. This dependence of households on gram panchayat functionaries provides potential scope for corruption by the latter.

It was also observed that for 24% of households, the toilet construction was led by the GP functionaries, and the beneficiaries were asked to hand over the incentive amount to the gram panchayat. Possible reasons this could be the pressure on gram panchayat to achieve targets in time, as well as the lack of willingness on the part of some community members. The reason for the latter could be behavioural, and/or lack of adequate capital. In some cases, the entire incentive money was taken by the GP without informing the beneficiaries about the inputs and construction costs, which is in contradiction to the program's philosophy of creating ownership among community and building accountability of the officials. Also, there have been concerns about toilets constructed by the GP being incomplete or of poor quality.

Equity and ethical considerations

It was reported that the provision of transferring incentives in instalments is not being encouraged by the district administration. A possible reason for this is that a few households, after receiving the first instalment, did not complete the toilet construction. This has affected the households which can't afford to construct the toilet in one go. Also, some elderly and PWD respondents reported difficulties in withdrawing incentive amount from their bank accounts.

The head of household is asked to stand in front of the toilet while taking the geo-tagged photo. All these photographs along with beneficiary details like name, address, phone number, Samagra ID, and location etc can be accessed from the web portal. Here the program may need to think about ensuring privacy of beneficiaries and security of their personal information.

Learnings

The introduction of direct benefit transfer model in Swachh Bharat Mission in Madhya Pradesh has helped the state government in strengthening processes and addressing a number of program bottlenecks. Other states may derive a few learnings from this experience and roll out similar models in order to enhance program quality and impact. Some key enablers of direct benefit transfer in large-scale government programs, involving the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for its implementation, have been identified and explained below.

Bank account coverage and unique identification system

Before the rollout of direct benefit transfer model, Madhya Pradesh government had in place the key enablers for the success of this model; namely a unique identification system for beneficiaries, a near to universal bank account coverage, and most importantly, a linkage between the two. As a result, the processes of beneficiary enrolment and incentive disbursal were implemented smoothly (although there were few cases where elderly and PWD respondents reported difficulty in withdrawing money from their account). This is in stark comparison to other programs in India where direct benefit transfer has been introduced, where lack of these enablers is a huge hurdle in its implementation.

Community awareness and capacity building

In order to make such programs more community-oriented, the adoption of appropriate ICTs needs to be supplemented with efforts to promote reach of the technology among community members, and build their capacities to access and use it. This will help in achieving the policy objectives of greater accountability, transparency, community ownership and citizen engagement.

Robust processes

While the introduction of ICT can improve governance by minimizing the margin for human error, the human element cannot be completely eliminated. Designing robust processes such as capacity building of implementers and community, monitoring, grievance redressal, accountability mechanisms etc. could play a significant role here. Inputs, outputs, stakeholders (makers, checkers), stakeholder responsibilities, accountability measures, timelines, remedial measures for all activities need to be clearly defined. In order to improve reliability, separate makers and checkers may need to be designated for critical activities. Also, enhancing data protection and privacy is an area which may require greater thought and efforts.

References

AFRIDI F. 2017 *Governance and public service delivery in India*. Indian Statistical Institute

CHOWDHARY A. M. 2017 *Direct Benefit Transfer Programme: The Case of Dilli Annashree Yojana*. OneWorld Foundation India

DIPANKAR G. 2017 *Money for toilets they built never came, now they are trapped*
[online] [February 5, 2018]. Available from: http://indianexpress.com/article/india/money-for-toilets-they-built-never-came-now-they-are-trapped-uttar-pradesh-chhattisgarh-swachh-bharat-abhiyan-4529164/

MDWS 2017 *Guidelines for Swachh Bharat Mission Gramin*. Ministry of Drinking Water & Sanitation, Government of India

IDS et al. 2017 *Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) Immersive Research*. Institute of Development Studies, Praxis and WaterAid

WADHAWAN D.A. 2017 *Money siphoned off under Swachh Bharat Mission Scheme due to possible collusion at ground level*. [online] [February 10, 2018]. Available from:

https://www.indiatoday.in/india/rajasthan/story/swachh-bharat-mission-scheme-narendra-modi-reward-corruption-rajasthan-1054904-2017-09-29

WATERAID 2017 *Quality and sustainability of toilets: A rapid assessment of technologies under Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin*

Notes

1. In India, the local governance system in rural areas comprises of three levels- district (highest), block and village (lowest). Gram Panchayat is the local village self-governance unit, elected by the citizens of the village. The panchayat is chaired by the elected leader of the village, known as a Sarpanch. The Secretary of the panchayat is a non-elected representative, appointed by the state government, to oversee panchayat activities. Gram Rozgar Sahayak (GRS) is the panchayat level functionary involved in execution of various government schemes, including SBM.
2. CM helpline, an initiative of the MP state government, is a toll free number by means of which a citizen can connect to the government directly and share grievances and complaints.
3. According to the maker and checker principle, at least two individuals must be required to complete a particular activity- one responsible for executing it and other for its verification and confirmation.

Contact details

Kanika Singh is a development consultant with interests in livelihoods, sanitation and public policy. Raman V. R. is the Head of Policy at WaterAid India, with expertise in systems and policies in health, sanitation and education sectors. Dr. Andrés Hueso is the Senior Policy Analyst-Sanitation at WaterAid with interests in sanitation, research and policy.

Kanika Singh
501A, IRCON CGHS, Dwarka, New Delhi, India
Tel: 9818733457
Email: 26kanika@gmail.com

Raman VR
WaterAid India, 2nd Floor, DLTA complex, Africa Avenue, New Delhi, India
Tel: 01166124400
Email: VRRaman@wateraid.org