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Trust lost between governments and citizens during Covid-19 pandemic?

RTI/FOI can help to retrieve it



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The relationship between governments and the people has been badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in many countries. Except in a few countries, people found it difficult to believe the government's information. They saw vast discrepancies between the reality and what they were told. Governments did not trust their citizens to "do the right thing", and imposed measures rather than seeking cooperation. Ultimately, this lack of mutual trust made efforts to contain the virus more difficult.

How did we get here? When the pandemic began earlier in the year, all governments were confronted with an enemy utterly unknown to them. There was no knowledge as to how it will behave and what havoc it may cause. States had to gear up on a war footing. And in doing that, many fumbled.

Governments had to immediately devise ways and find means to contain the deadly enemy. They had to feed the public with information that would console and reassure them. People looked to

governments for guidance and leadership. They wanted to know if they would be safe and healthy in their hands.

Some governments succeeded in carrying the people along, but the majority failed. As government measures to curb the menace failed to work, people began to lose faith in the information they received from public authorities. Populations began to ignore government strictures. Irrate public authorities imposed strict surveillance measures. This further soured government-people relationship.

The buildup of such distrust under circumstances fostered by the crisis is not inevitable. Government measures to contain the pandemic may be categorised into three overlapping phases of activities—response, recovery and revival.

During the response phase, governments had to move fast, and bypass many established procedures which stood in the way. Unfortunately, most governments did not care to explain their actions. As the situation continued like this, peoples' exasperation increased, and the information/trust gap widened. Governments ordered business to close, introduced lockdowns, controlled people's movements, curtailed travel, reallocated economic activities to meet urgent medical needs and clamped down on critics and dissenters. They undertook procurement of medical supplies/equipment and engaged in a spending spree unprecedented in the history of most states. An inevitable result of all these frenzied activities was the emergence of cheats who engaged in profiteering. Governments did or could do little to tame public rage and fight corruption.

While tending to the immediate medical and health needs, governments had to start thinking about recovery needs. This required shifting of focus to economic activities and mitigating the broader impacts of the crisis. They had to consider returning public institutions to their normal mode. Businesses, industries, schools, offices, public transportation, restaurants, sports and other institution of public interest had to be reopened, while the virus continued its rampage. Public perceptions about these differed greatly. In many areas, governments had to move rather swiftly, shortcutting traditional controls, with unilateral executive actions. Such actions raised transparency and accountability concerns.

While most governments are still preoccupied with response and recovery, the reconstruction and rehabilitation process—the revival phase—cannot be left unattended for long. Governments are required to consider long-term improvements to public operations—to ensure preparedness to

respond effectively to future health risks of such a magnitude. They will have to revisit the supply chains, reassess the preparedness and capacity of medical facilities, re-evaluate old rules and regulations, allow the spread of technologies that have proven effective during the crisis, such as digitalisation.

The key to recovery of the lost trust will be the ability of governments to take the people along in the difficult tasks that lie ahead.

RTI/FOI Acts can help governments minimise citizen's concerns about their actions. They can make proactive disclosures, as provided under the law, to inform people about measures taken. Many governments did that, some better than others. But more than that the law also provides for individual rights to obtain information that would go deeper and show whether government functionaries and bodies fulfilled their public responsibilities with diligence, honesty and integrity. Such information is often not susceptible to be proactively disclosed. And since individual use of the law became impossible in most countries because of the pandemic, citizens had no scope to obtain them. If governments are inclined to demonstrate their responsibility of transparency and accountability under the law, there are many ways of doing so. Unfortunately, such a sense of responsibility is lost on most public offices and officials.

Peoples' need for information during the pandemic, as observed in most countries, has actually not been that great. They were limited primarily to areas where they felt uncertain if government decisions to deal with the crisis were based on scientific knowledge, expertise and guidance, with the interest of the people and the nation foremost in mind. Many were interested in information normally contained in minutes of meetings, such as the first meeting of the Task Force, who participated in them, their names and qualifications, the proportion of scientists among them, including social scientists. Others wanted to know who decided on lockdown measures and how, on basis of what scientific data. How economic relief was to be provided to the people? Who were the decision makers? Was the government providing incentives for rapid development of diagnostics, medical equipment, vaccines? What specific measures were taken to stop corruption in the procurement of lifesaving medicine, equipment and other health needs? What measures were taken to stop abuse of government's economic stimulus packages and ensure their fair distribution? Were cabinet ministers taking pay cuts as part of austerity measure of the government? And how the government intends to balance privacy needs with the advantages of digital disease surveillance and tracing.

Looking to the future and recovery, the government can use the RTI principles of transparency and accountability to update the public on its public health improvement plans, and its research and development goals, its investment in social science to prepare better for the trust deficit next time. There are countless questions government can anticipate and provide answers for, without having to be asked through individual RTI applications.

In times of large-scale calamities, like the Covid-19 pandemic, people's fear increases exponentially; and their need to know what their governments are doing to meet the challenge increases commensurately. In such a situation, governments need to be more careful not only to anticipate people's concerns but also be adept in answering/assuaging them. Public leaders must be prepared to communicate clearly, consistently, and constantly with the people. They must remember that citizens are prone to be more cooperative when they understand why they are being asked to do or not to do certain things. A "people-first" approach, supported by genuine data, can foster proper public behaviour and discourage those that are harmful. An important lesson that may be drawn from the Covid-19 experience is that without well-tuned government-people collaboration, large-scale catastrophes cannot be handled effectively.

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