



Distribution: LIMITED

E/ECA/DISD/CODI.3/30

6 May 2003

**UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL**

Original: English

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

Third Meeting of the Committee
on Development Information (CODI)

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
10 – 17 May 2003

**Information Age Government:
Success Stories of Online Land Records & Revenue Governance from India**

Executive Summary

by

Dr K M Baharul Islam¹

¹ Chairman, State Rural Technology Promotion Council, Government of Assam, India
Associate Professor of EFL, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

1. Background:

The manual systems of maintaining land records in India are as diverse as the country itself. The traditional methods have been changing over the years in each state according to local practices and traditions. The procedure for recording transfer and ownership of lands, shares and inheritance is generally based on a particular Identity number for each plot of land. Revenue assessment and agricultural yield related data are also recorded against that specific identification number. Village revenue officers are entrusted with the maintenance of these records and updating these records every harvesting season and on transfer of ownership. However, such records are not updated for years and when the book that records the transactions is the only document with legal standing, the matter becomes worse for the persons involved in the ownership of the land.

Several national development and planning policies repeatedly focused on land as an asset, which provides the primary and secondary needs of the people. As such for successful implementation developmental projects needed proper and correct land records. Emergence of computer as a cornerstone of quicker storing, processing and retrieving of information database initiated the government into computerisation of traditional land records. Decentralised planning and administration as envisaged in the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India made it more necessary to collect timely and accurate data on land use for national planning process.

2. Legal Postulates

E-governance entails that the citizens will be provided with a single place to retrieve information about government's plans, programmes, projects, policies and legislation. Therefore a number of legislative measures by the union and state governments over the years prepared the ground for e-governance.

A national Action Plan for Effective and Responsive Government was adopted at the Conference of Chief Ministers held on 24th May 1997 in New Delhi. The action plan aims at making administration accountable and citizen-friendly, ensuring transparency and right to information and motivating the civil services.

Based on the second aim as indicated above, several state governments in India have enacted Right to Information legislation like Goa Right to Information Act, 1997; Tamil Nadu Right to Information Act, 1997; Rajasthan Right to Information Act, 2000 and Karnataka Right to Information Bill, 2000. At the national level the Freedom of Information Bill was passed in December 2002 "to provide for freedom to every citizen to secure access to information under the control of public authorities, consistent with public interest, in order to promote openness, transparency and accountability in administration and in relation to matters connected therewith or incidental thereto". On the other hand the Information Technology Act came into force from October 18, 2000 which facilitated legal validity of transactions on the Internet and paved the way for the citizens to conduct of business with the Government without leaving the comfort of their homes and facing the discomfort of overbearing officials. However, with ITA 2000, only the framework is in place that will lead to actual procedures of e-governance.

3. Objectives of the Computerisation of Land Records (CLR) Scheme

Keeping in mind all the aforesaid ideas, Computerisation of Land Records (CLR) Scheme was conceived with following objectives:

- a. To facilitate easy maintenance and updating of changes which occur in land database such as changes due to availability of irrigation/natural calamities/consolidation/ or on account of legal changes like transfer of ownership, partition, land acquisition, lease etc.
- b. To provide for comprehensive scrutiny to make land records tamper-proof, which may reduce the menace of litigation and social conflicts, associated with land disputes.
- c. To provide the required support for implementation of development programmes for which data about distribution of land holdings is vital.
- d. To facilitate detailed planning for infrastructure as well as environment development.
- e. To facilitate preparation of an annual set of records in the mechanised process and thereby producing accurate documents for recording details such as collection of land revenue, cropping pattern etc.
- f. To facilitate a variety of standard and ad-hoc queries on land data.
- g. To provide database for agricultural census.

4. Success Stories:

a. Karnataka : *Bhoomi* (Land)

Karnataka started computerisation of land records way back in 1991 under the CLR scheme through a pilot project funded by the Government of India. Further computerization of land records were undertaken in all districts in the state of Karnataka by 1996. However, no provision was made to install computers at *taluk* level where manual records were actually updated.

The Department of Revenue in Karnataka has computerized 20 million records of land ownership of 6.7 million farmers in the state. A number of services like procuring a copy of the Record of Rights, Tenancy and Crops (RTC) are now available through land record computer kiosk set up by the department at the sub-divisional (*Taluk*) offices. On payment of a nominal fee of Rs. 15 (\$.31) landowners, especially the farmers who need such documents for obtaining other facilities like bank loans can now get a copy of the RTC online. In the next phase the records are expected to be available online right at the village level through rural Internet kiosks. It has been reported by the land record officials that there has been a 50% increase in the number of mutation requests registered with the department. This increase seems to indicate a mass acceptance of the new system.

One of the major outcomes of the program has been the elimination of the tedious process of pursuing the village revenue accountants who are corrupted and make a mutation process very lengthy through the manual process. Further, there were many inaccuracies crept into the records by the unscrupulous manipulations of the village accounts. With fingerprint identification software all land record related transactions were stored and the concerned user/official is identified and made accountable for his decisions and actions.

b. Himachal Pradesh: *Lokmitra* (People's Friend)

The LokMitra Project was started in the pilot district of Hamirpur in the state of Himachal Pradesh and finally inaugurated to the users on 8th May'2001. Eight multifunction Citizen Information Centres (*Soochna Kendras*) were opened to the public. A large number of requests and grievances started pouring in. A ten day time frame was fixed for attending these requests. Based on the positive and enthusiastic acceptance of the system, the government is now planning to extend the services to all over the states in the next phase.

A typical operation in a Citizen Information Centre (CIC) goes as follows. Earlier anybody who wants demarcation of his land done has to go round the revenue officials and the work used to take months and often years. Now he can just drop into the nearest CIC and lodge his complaint/request for demarcation of land registered paying the a small fee of Rs.10 (.20\$). A retired Delhi Police officer Sh. Daleep Singh, for instance, lodged a similar request and in less than a week he received an acknowledging mail from the Revenue Department and the demarcation was also done on his land. Examples like this are many and the State Government is now planning to broaden the scope of LokMitra (People's friend) program to include employment generation for the rural youth, expediting rural development and redressing complaints of the rural population within a stipulated time frame.

c. Haryana : Rewari District

Computerisation of Land Records in Rewari was initiated in the year 1990-91 as a pilot project with initial cost of only Rs. 2.15 Million (\$ 45,000) in the collaboration with National Informatics Centre. All the 412 land records compilations (*Jamabandies*) in the three sub-divisions are now available in the computers installed at the Land Records Computerisation Centres at all the three Sub-divisional (*Tehsil*) offices and copies of land records are being issued to the public on demand by the clerk-cum-operator & Revenue Accountant in-charge of the centres.

5. Lessons learned / Challenges faced:

Some of the major lessons learned and challenges faced by the project at the implementation stage were:

- a. Data entry was problematic due to erroneous land records kept by village revenue officials, non-reporting of land transaction within families and the initial reluctance of the revenue officials to do the data entry works. In the pilot project data entry was done by private agencies offline but due to poor work culture, the process was very slow. Village revenue accountant was assigned to work with the operator to take over the data entry work after a year. Further, young graduates were also recruited and trained to be in charge of the centres.
- b. Removing the undue fear among the field officials regarding the project was necessary to launch the project. A number of information seminars and consultative meetings were held to take them into confidence emphasizing that they would continue to be responsible for field enquiry. Reducing corruption was not a key message at that stage.
- c. Key political executives like the Chief Minister and the Revenue Minister were completely involved in the project demonstrating a strong political will for computerization.

- d. As the old government officials and procedures like issuing the notice and taking the decision still remain in the hands of the revenue officials, the monitoring mechanism needs to be strengthened, as this serves as a crucial component for the success of the scheme.
- e. There is a need to spread more awareness about the implementation of the scheme among other departments who are partners in developmental planning. Training under the programme is inadequate; it should be conducted at different levels, District, Sub-division and Village.
- f. Digitisation of Cadastral Survey Maps should be done without which the land information system is incomplete.
- g. Networking of the scheme at different levels so that data moves from District to State and then to Centre through NICNET.

6. Epilogue

E-governance envisages efficient and transparent government-citizen interface and several states are using IT to revamp everything from payment of taxes, issuing of licenses, power distribution and even examination procedures. But these are yet only individual state government initiatives. Will it become a mass movement and have impact on the average citizen? E-governance demands a change in the mindset of bureaucracy. Will that happen? Currently new technologies are concentrated among political, commercial and other urban elites. Participation of the people in the developmental and democratic processes requires that the access to new technologies should be taken to grassroots. Merely putting computers in a government office won't help. We need to win the confidence of people who are ultimate users of the system. The initial indications were a bit depressing but popular acceptance of CLR programme shows that we are on the right track.

*Presently posted as an Associate Professor of EFL with the Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.
PO Box: 426, Addis Ababa 1110 Ethiopia. Tel: +251-1-635743 Email: bahar@avu.org