

Book Review

e-Governance for Development: A Focus on Rural India

Shirin Madon. *e-Governance for Development: A Focus on Rural India*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 256 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-230-20157-6.

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Recent academic and policy discourse has converged around the idea that “good governance” is essential for human development and to uphold the principles of democracy. This discourse also promotes information and communication technologies (ICTs) and e-governance to improve the functioning of the state. Specifically, it aims to improve the efficiency of the state by shrinking it and to enhance its accountability and transparency by making the interface with citizens more inclusive. Shirin Madon, however, finds that although these ideas are accepted “unproblematically,” the “evidence so far shows that the linkage between better technology and better governance and ultimately better development is not automatic” (p. 2). Arguing that any problematization must acknowledge governance not as a formal managerial or technological issue, but as a historically specific social activity, Madon goes on to show the ways in which formal and informal state–society interactions are central to shaping development outcomes. In doing so, her book illuminates the conceptual inadequacies of good governance.

The book is organized in three parts. Part 1 provides a review of the literature on development, governance, good governance, and e-governance for development. The literature on governance and e-governance, in particular, is extensive and tightly synthesized. Part 2 presents three case studies drawn from India, where, in recent years, e-governance has become a cornerstone of government policy. The cases represent three development sectors, in three states of the country, with distinct social and administrative histories. Although the author provides no analytical rationale for the choice of case studies, her 15 years of researching the cases are reflected in the firm grasp of the empirical material. The book concludes in Part 3 with a discussion of the relevance of the case studies to e-governance for development interventions at large.

Appraising the Efficacy of Good Governance and E-Governance

Central to Madon’s review of the governance literature is a critique of good governance, a policy agenda that emerged from international development agencies, by contrasting it with the critical governance literature within the social sciences. The good governance agenda has distinct political and bureaucratic elements to it. While the former emphasizes the strengthening of democracy by making governments transparent and accountable, the latter emphasizes administrative simplification through

decentralization. In reality, the two are closely linked and mutually reinforcing, which the good governance agenda fails to recognize. By contrast, the critical governance literature conceptualizes this link “through a dialectic between central governments, state government, local administration, political bodies, civil society organisations and citizens” (p. 43). Further, whereas the critical governance literature argues that the state remains an important player in the execution of development programs, the good governance agenda, through its prescriptions of efficiency, accountability, and democratization, calls for a rollback of the state.

E-governance is advocated as a tool to achieve the policy prescriptions of the good governance agenda. However, there is ample evidence that many e-governance projects, in the developing and the developed world, have not resulted in significant improvements in citizen services and welfare. There are several reasons for this. One, many projects do not qualify as e-governance projects. They may at best be classified as e-administration or e-services applications despite their “overtly developmental objectives” (p. 62). Two, thus far, there is little knowledge “about the extent to which these types of e-governance projects promote development, as research in this area has been conducted in a largely anecdotal and piecemeal fashion” (p. 57). Three, the impact of these projects is poorly understood, as most have taken a managerial view, focusing on “efficiency and cost reduction” (p. 35) rather than assessing gains to society.

The Developmental Significance of Informal Processes

It is in this context that Madon emphasizes the need to redefine the linkage between governance and development, as this will ultimately dictate the implementation of development policies. Conceptualizing an “e-governance for development” framework derived from both the literature review and the case studies, the author outlines a methodology that emphasizes multiple levels of analysis. At the macro level, the roles of development policies and strategies are important. At the micro level, Madon emphasizes the need to focus on how community members benefit from improved governance. The in-between level, comprising numerous “local administrative, political and social ‘intermediaries,’

provides an interface between the formal and informal governance structure to bring about development benefits for communities” (p. 53). Madon demonstrates the relevance of these informal processes through her case studies by documenting the “interplay of local administrative, political and social systems that leads to democratic governance” (p. 33). It is these informal structures of negotiation and coordination that play a vital role in supporting formal interventions and therefore need to be acknowledged and theorized.

The first case looks at the role of MIS for monitoring a rural self-employment program, the *Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana* (SGSY), in the state of Gujarat. The second examines the genesis and evolution of the Akshaya telecenter project in Kerala, which was established to improve community development in rural areas. The third case is a health information system to improve public health care in rural Karnataka. In all three case studies, the state is a key player: through its field workers in Gujarat and Karnataka and through various government offices in Kerala.

In the cases, the author documents the impact of each intervention from the point of view of the communities it is intended for. In Gujarat, Madon describes how the “intelligence” of government workers, and the important role they play in sustaining self-help groups, is not embedded in the formal MIS. She then casts doubt on the extent to which the MIS can promote development by improving the administration of the SGSY. In Kerala, the telecenter interventions were meant to improve the economic and social lives of rural communities. But, more than being spaces for technology, the telecenters provide a social space for integrating local administrative, political, and social systems, which bring together local expertise on one hand and scientific domain knowledge and the state on the other. In Karnataka, the author evaluates health information systems in a primary health center to show the “important role of local health fieldworkers, other key government workers and political representatives in providing a community-based system of healthcare for the rural poor communities” (p. 136).

Through her cases, Madon demonstrates the dependence of the formal structures of negotiation and coordination on informal processes, thereby arguing that the success of any intervention calls for an understanding of the informal environment

within which the formal intervention is inserted. This understanding provides not just crucial information about development issues but also helps address the “dynamic, unpredictable and idiosyncratic elements of development planning that are often glossed over in the governance reform agenda” (p. 162). While the importance of the informal environment has been emphasized by scholars, it has remained marginal in development practice. “It has always been easier to develop e-governance applications which rely on obtaining and inputting quantitative data for measuring progress but which may or may not have a bearing on improving the living conditions of communities” (p. 163).

Overall, this well researched and structured book makes a robust case for the historical specificity of

e-governance for development initiatives by highlighting the limitations of standardized technology-as-development solutions. Analytically, it contributes to an emerging body of literature that focuses on the social appropriation of ICTs¹ rather than viewing e-governance as a mere techno-managerial process without any tensions over the social meaning of technology. Empirically, by showing the ways in which formal and informal processes are intertwined, and the continued developmental role of the state at various sociospatial scales, it convincingly exposes the limits of the good governance agenda. As this empirically grounded and theoretically informed book achieves the goals it sets for itself, this reviewer recommends it as a model and a platform for further research in e-governance. ■

1. Instances of such literature include:

Kuriyan, R., & Ray, I. (2009). *Outsourcing the state: Public-private partnerships and information technologies in India*. *World Development*, 37(10), 1663–1673.

Malhotra, P. (2005). *Technology and the politics of corruption: Andhra Pradesh's CARD experience*. In R. K. Bagga, K. Keniston, & R. Raj Mathur (Eds.), *The state, IT and development* (pp. 158–181). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

