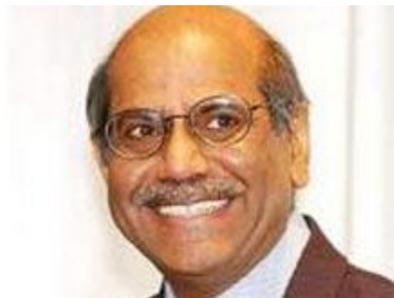# Shyam Saran: Delivering on good governance

Four points the PM should keep in mind as he takes on governance challenges

Shyam Saran January 12, 2016 Last Updated at 21:50 IST

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has brought a welcome focus to good governance. He has mandated that several groups of secretaries come up with breakthrough ideas in different key policy areas to ensure substantive results, whether it is on inclusive growth or promoting his Clean India campaign. What is noteworthy about this initiative is its acknowledgment of the cross-domain character of most challenges that our country confronts. These demand inter-disciplinary and collaborative responses from agencies of government that are conditioned to work in their respective silos. If the prime minister can sustain this innovative approach by institutionalising it, this itself would be a major gain. One hopes that this does not remain an ad hoc arrangement.

How can Mr Modi deliver on good governance? From my own experience in bureaucracy, I would emphasise the following:

One, the temptation to bypass institutions or to violate processes that institutions are expected to work through, needs to be strongly resisted. There may be emergencies where ad hoc responses may be necessary or a particular functionary may be mandated to handle the situation. However, these must be resorted to only rarely and for reasons that are clearly enunciated. Institutions are important because they function according to well-laid rules and regulations. The personnel manning them are expected to have the necessary qualifications and experience. The element of discretion is reduced. This is particularly important in a democracy which functions according to the rule of law.

Two, institutions and the processes through which they operate need to be constantly adapted to changing circumstances. It is better to upgrade existing institutions and adjust their processes rather than emasculate them in favour of either ad hoc arrangements or by setting up entirely new institutions which compete with existing ones. Institutions are important also because they enable institutional memory to be accumulated and used as a learning experience for the future. This is critical to good governance.

Three, institutions must be enabled to improve decision-making through in-built processes of review. Our policymaking suffers because it is not based on adequate and accurate data, despite

such data collection and analysis having become much easier and more affordable in our digital age. Data collection and analysis alerts the policymaker about what works and what does not. It reduces the hit and miss character of much of our governmental functioning. In the corporate sector, Big Data is leading to new, more efficient business strategies. Data is analysed to yield information, which is used to expose patterns that in turn leads to insights. It is insights which become the bedrock of strategy. Good governance needs a similar approach. The country welcomed the prime minister's drive against open defecation in the country and the large-scale building of toilets throughout rural India. Large sums of money were spent on this both from government revenues as also under corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives of public sector companies. Today, anecdotal evidence indicates that a very large proportion are dysfunctional or lying unused. It may have taken more time, but would it not have been better to first analyse what steps may be necessary to ensure the proper maintenance of these toilets, whether water supply was available in areas where they were being constructed, and whether communities had been educated on how to maintain them? In several villages, the unflushed and unflushable toilets are soon avoided for the relatively cleaner fields outdoors. There are cultural issues that need to be addressed too.

Four, bureaucracy in India is usually blamed for being an obstacle to reform and change. In fact, bureaucracy can be a major driver of change provided the right environment is created for its functioning. After all, in a developing country like India, which is woefully short of skills and capacity, the Indian bureaucracy constitutes an unmatched pool of talent and experience. Unfortunately, the current incentives and disincentives for the bureaucracy generate risk-awareness and defensive behaviour rather than an innovative spirit. A bureaucrat is far more liable to penalty and setback in his career prospects for an act of commission. He would very rarely pay for an act of omission, even if this results in a loss to the government. Furthermore, the current tendency to offer post-retirement sinecures to retired senior civil servants inhibits independent functioning and advice to political masters. The appointment to various commissions and statutory bodies should be through open competition, in which a retired bureaucrat, if qualified, could offer his services. In the longer term, it is necessary to go back to the policy of recruiting relatively younger people into the bureaucracy. The earlier age limit of 24 was appropriate. If, as is the case currently, there are recruits over 30, it would be difficult to mould them through training into agents of change.

These are some of the issues to ponder over if we wish to promote good governance.

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http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/shyam-saran-delivering-on-good-governance-116011201178_1.html