Enhancing Transparency and Accountability of Public Programs:

An initiative of Samarthan in Madhya Pradesh named 'Dekh-Parakh'
(This is an abridged version of a publication of Samarthan on the social accountability practice prepared by Shraddha Suman)

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on using technology to enhance access to public services and promote transparency and accountability. The concept of e-governance has gained momentum, aiming to streamline processes, reduce transaction costs and time, and simplify to prove eligibility for accessing services. Information Technology (IT) is being increasingly utilized to create accountable and transparent systems, improve outreach, and enhance service quality. Through online monitoring systems, grievance-redressal mechanisms, mobile-based applications, and biometric technologies, government institutions are striving to facilitate Government-to-Citizen services.

One of the key objectives of e-governance is to provide citizens with easier access to information throughout the entire cycle of access to schemes/ services, from the application, approval of entitlement requests to their final realization. As a result, major schemes and programs now have their own dedicated portals or mobile applications making substantial amounts of data available to the public in user-friendly formats. This enables citizens to access these services with minimal external support.

However, despite the laudable intent behind introducing e-governance, digital access to services continues to pose challenges. Firstly, different agencies have distinct procedures for accessing information. Secondly, there is a multitude of platforms and sources through which services can be accessed. Thirdly, there is a need to establish eligibility for various services, and most portals and platforms do not communicate with one another. Finally, errors of exclusion and inclusion in eligibility databases of schemes and services are prevalent due to the absence of proper synchronisation between the eligibility authentication like Jandhan (bank account), Aaadhar and Mobile, (popularly known as JAM) and other program related cards issued like Job card under MGNREGA, Ayushman Bharat card, etc.

Additionally, low awareness, rent-seeking behaviour, complex procedural requirements, and the involvement of multiple agencies in delivering a single service further contribute to inefficiencies, leakages, and poor accountability. The lack of rationalization and simplification of schemes and associated processes creates a daunting barrier for citizens. Another significant challenge is the substantial gap between the data uploaded on scheme portals and the ground reality. When confronted with issues of poor service or entitlement delivery, local bureaucracies often rely on data from scheme Management Information Systems (MIS) and portals to claim that implementation is smooth and entitlements are reaching intended beneficiaries. However, they fail to recognize and initiate action on the information entered by their own staff to understand the ground reality.

Given the discrepancies between portal data and ground reality, ensures accountability, and enabling the citizens to access their entitlements effectively, Samarthan, a Bhopal based CSO initiated a citizen-led initiative under the banner of *Dekh Parakh* (*Dekh* - See the web-based official information on entitlements and **Parakh** – check/ verify with the people). This initiative was undertaken during 2016 – 18 in one block each in seven districts: i. Panna, ii. Chattarpur, iii. Tikamgarh, iv. Sehore, v. Raisen,

vi. Mandla and vii. Barwani. These blocks were characterized by high inequity, feudal dominance, extreme caste and gender-based discrimination, low scheme coverage, weak institutions, poor digital literacy, and accountability issues.

Based on the publication of Samarthan, this write up is prepared with an aim for replication of the methodology adopted. This write-up explains the purpose, functioning, and impact of Dekh Parakh in bridging the gap and promoting grassroots accountability in rural areas.

Objective: The primary aim of the Dekh-Parakh initiative is to empower the community, particularly those who are vulnerable and marginalized, by enabling them to access, understand, and utilize digital information available on government portals. The initiative seeks to bridge the gap between the information displayed on portals and the actual on-the-ground reality, while also promoting transparency and accountability. The key objectives of the initiative are as follows:

1. Validate and ensure the accuracy of the data presented on scheme portals, actively addressing any discrepancies or errors that may be identified.
2. Enhance the familiarity of the community on digital data, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to hold relevant stakeholders accountable for their actions.
3. Improve the transparency, efficiency, and inclusivity of social security program implementation, specifically targeting programs like MGNREGS, PMAY, and SBMG. This involves ensuring that entitled individuals receive their benefits promptly and that the programs are accessible to all eligible beneficiaries.

By accomplishing these objectives, the Dekh-Parakh initiative aims to empower the community, foster social accountability, and contribute to the overall effectiveness and fairness of governance in the targeted programs. Some of the observations of Dekh-Parakh Sainiks based on their comparison of data on the official portal portal and actual situation based on the survey may be mentioned here to provide more clarity about the initiative. In PMAY, 72% of completed houses were being used for living, while the remaining were abandoned or used as storehouses. This speaks about the targeting. 2% of incomplete houses were falsely shown as complete on the portal by uploading fake photographs. In MGNREGA, about 8% of the surveyed works were found to be useless, and another 15% were of very poor quality. Only 34% of the assets created were considered good quality, while 43% were of satisfactory quality. On pension scheme, it was observed that approximately 23% of pension holders were not receiving pensions due to their bank accounts not being properly linked with Aadhaar. In other words, the official portal and website data was compared with the survey to ascertain the issues of efficiency of public programs.

Implementation Process: The implementation process of Dekh-Parakh involved a systematic approach that empowered local youth, validated portal data, identified scheme delivery issues, ensured accountability, engaged with media, and integrated field experiences with reports. These key steps aimed to bridge the gap between data presented on portals and the ground reality, while enhancing transparency, efficiency, and inclusivity in the implementation of social security programs. Close collaboration has been established with Gram Panchayats (GPs), their representatives, and staff members. The focus was on identifying gaps in scheme delivery and sharing individual cases of entitlement denial. By utilizing portal data, the initiative sought to improve everyday governance and

promote community inclusion in demanding social accountability. It aimed to ensure the realization of rights and entitlements for individuals who faced difficulties navigating the established processes.

1. **Identification and Training of Local Volunteers: Samarthan** initiated the implementation of Dekh-Parakh by identifying a group of enthusiastic young volunteers from each project village. These volunteers demonstrated a keen interest in using technology, possessed smartphones, and had a strong desire to contribute to their community. They underwent intensive training on accessing, interpreting, and analyzing data from government portals. This training equipped them with the necessary skills to become effective community monitors.

2. **Validation / cross check of Portal Data:** The trained volunteers, known as *Dekh-Parakh Sainiks*, played a crucial role in validating the data presented on government portals. They collected the data from the portal including the names of the beneficiaries and checked at the community level by conducting a survey. By comparing the portal data with the actual situation on the ground, they were able to identify discrepancies and gaps in the implementation of social security programs.

3. **Identification and Reporting of Issues:** The Dekh-Parakh Sainiks focused their monitoring efforts on key social security programs like MGNREGS, PMAY, and SBMG. They actively sought out common issues faced by beneficiaries, such as fake muster rolls, delayed or non-payment to actual workers, incomplete works falsely marked as complete, incorrect bank account details, and irregularities in pension disbursement. These issues were documented and reported to relevant stakeholders, including Gram Panchayats, local administration, and departments responsible for the implementation of these programs.

4. **Last Mile Connect and Accountability:** A primary objective of Dekh-Parakh was to ensure accountability in the last mile delivery of entitlements. The Dekh-Parakh Sainiks closely collaborated with Gram Panchayats and local representatives to address individual cases of entitlement denial. By utilizing portal data, they actively engaged in improving everyday governance and facilitating the realization of rights and entitlements for the community members. This involved working closely with the beneficiaries, community leaders, and local administrative bodies to resolve issues and rectify the delivery process.

5. **Media Engagement:** Samarthan recognized the importance of media engagement in raising awareness and drawing attention to issues related to entitlement access and social accountability. In situations where local administration was less responsive or when it was crucial to bring certain issues to the notice of a larger audience, including the administration, Samarthan actively collaborated with local media outlets. This strategic engagement with the media helped amplify the impact of the Dekh-Parakh initiative and fostered a culture of transparency and accountability.

6. **Integration of Dekh-Parakh Reports:** The field experiences of Dekh-Parakh Sainiks, along with their findings, were complemented by the Dekh-Parakh reports. The reports provided detailed insights, including anecdotal evidence and nuanced understanding of challenges related to portal data. This integration helped identify discrepancies in the data reported on the portals and contributed to efforts to rectify them.

Main Findings from the Survey on Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY):

1. House Utilization: 72% of completed houses were being used for living, while the remaining were abandoned or used as storehouses.
2. Quality of Construction: Only 8% of completed houses showed poor quality of construction.
3. Manipulation and Fraud: 1.5% of PMAY entitlements involved complete manipulation and fraud, where sanctioned houses were given to someone else through cheating, coercion, or fraudulent withdrawal of money.
4. Fake Completion: 2% of incomplete houses were falsely shown as complete on the portal by uploading fake photographs.
5. Discrepancies in Priority Selection: Significant discrepancies were found in the selection of priority households from the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) priority list. The SECC priority list being available on a separate link made it difficult for program monitors to identify violations in priority rankings.
6. Poor Quality Subcontracting: Approximately 8% of PMAY houses were informally subcontracted by Gram Panchayats (GPs) to themselves. Construction in such cases was substandard, frequently incomplete, and of poor quality. Examples include houses without roofing, flooring, or proper entrances, such as an old woman's house constructed 8 to 10 feet above the ground without support to enter or exit.
7. Stalled Construction: 5% of cases withdrew the first installment and started construction but halted at different stages due to reasons such as migration, personal circumstances, or complex disqualifications. In one instance, a large number of entitlement holders from the 'Kachhi' community were dropped after receiving the first/second installment because they owned low-value, dilapidated boats used for chestnut cultivation.
8. Incomplete Houses: Only 34% of surveyed complete houses had plastering on inside walls, while 47% and 61% had flooring and doors/windows, respectively. Many incomplete houses indicated that households ran out of funds to finish construction, with some households occupying houses without plastered walls, doors, or windows, often accumulating heavy debts to complete them.
9. Cost Overruns: Only 30% of households could complete their houses within the sanctioned amount of Rs 1.2 lakh.
10. Wage Irregularities: Wages for construction were either not paid or paid partially in 54% of cases. Fraudulent pocketing of wages by Panchayat Sachivs or Gram Rozgar Sahayaks through fake muster rolls was a common issue. Lack of integration between the PMAY portal and the MGNREGS portal hindered the identification of payment recipients.
11. Delayed Tranche Releases: In 10% to 15% of cases, there were substantial and often deliberate delays in releasing the second and third tranches of funds. In some instances, houses at lintel level or post-lintel level received only two tranches instead of three. Delays were sometimes due to demands for bribes or "speed money" for uploading construction progress on the portal.
12. Panchayat's Role: Gram Panchayats provided technical assistance in 78% of cases, albeit in limited ways, to PMAY entitlement holders.

Overall, the survey revealed challenges such as manipulation, incomplete construction, poor quality, delayed payments, and discrepancies in the implementation of PMAY. These findings highlight the need for improved monitoring, transparent processes, and better support for beneficiaries to ensure the program's success.

In village Maheba in Maheba Gram Panchayat in the Chattarpur district of MP, a daily wage labourer working in both Madhya Pradesh and the NCR region, also engaged in agriculture labour during sowing and harvesting seasons, availed the benefits of the PM Awas Yojna. His house construction began in early 2017. He received all tranches of funds in time and completed the construction by mid-2018. However, a crucial payment of around Rs 15,000 for his labour through the MGNREGS remained unpaid. He reached out to local authorities, including the Gram Rozgar Sahayak and the Sarpanch, but to no avail. Multiple visits to the bank left him disheartened, until fate intervened. He encountered Rajendra, a trained village information volunteer from Samarthan, well-versed in program procedures and digital platforms.

Upon hearing the story, Rajendra promptly accessed the portal and discovered that the wages had already been disbursed. Astonishingly, neither the Panchayat nor the bank had informed the labourer about the transferred funds meant for his house construction. Rajendra revisited the portal and confirmed that the amount of Rs 14,661 for 89 days of work is deposited.

Realizing there was more to the situation, Rajendra delved deeper. Together with the labourer, they confronted the bank kiosk, where the kiosk-holder initially claimed to have made the payment. However, upon inspection of the transaction register, it became apparent that the labourer's name was missing. There was no evidence of his receipt in the bank's records.

Relying on his resourcefulness and persuasion skills, Rajendra urged the kiosk-holder to admit the truth. The guilty party, cornered by the weight of their actions, confessed and promised to repay the amount owed. It took further perseverance, but in April 2019, nearly a year after the house's completion, the kiosk-holder made a payment of Rs 14,000. They requested an additional three months to settle the remaining balance of Rs 1,000.

Key Findings of the Dekh Parakh Survey on MGNREGS:

1. Misappropriation and Misrepresentation: The survey found instances of completed works marked as ongoing and incomplete works marked as complete. It found involvement of contractors and machines that is prohibited under the Act. Approximately 80% completion certificates were issued inappropriately.

2. Regional Disparities: Different districts showed different tendencies in carrying out MGNREGS works. Some districts employed fewer machines and contractors, while others used machines extensively. Unavailability of labour were cited as reasons for using machines even in districts with ample labour is available.

3. Upfront Costs for Beneficiaries: The survey revealed that beneficiaries incurred substantial upfront costs until reimbursement was received through the online system. This has led to individual work taken up by relatively well-off households, while poor households did not opt as could not bear the cost which is reimbursed with undue delay.

4. Suspended Works: A significant finding was that a large number of works remained suspended for months, resulting in "dead losses." Nearly 29% of the ongoing work sites examined were found to be suspended for several months or years.

5. Completion Status Discrepancies: Out of the total works reported complete, only 63% of the works were actually found completeted on the ground. The remaining works were either under construction, abandoned, or not started.
6. Quality of Assets: About 15% of the surveyed works were of very poor quality and 8% were found to be of poor quality. Only 34% of the assets created were considered good quality, while 43% were of satisfactory quality as rated by the people.

In summary, the survey highlighted issues of misappropriation, misrepresentation, regional disparities, upfront costs for beneficiaries, suspended works, discrepancies in completion status, inappropriate completion certificates, and varying quality of assets in MGNREGS implementation.

> **Community Engaggement in the Dekh-Parakh:** In Jodai Gram Panchyat a Ratri Chaupal was organised. The information about the road construction from the website captured the attention of the entire community. The information indicated that a road had been constructed four years ago, connecting Anganwadi to Gabbarsingh's house, with an expenditure of Rs.4,50,000. This revelation left the community shocked, as no such road existed in reality. However, there was a need for this road. When the Sarpanch and the Secretary was asked to explain, they faltered, offering unconvincing answers. They explained that payment has been made for materials but construction could not be initiated due to water shortages. However, their explanations failed to convince the villagers. The news of the Panchayat's fraudulent actions hit the headlines the following day. Faced with public exposure, the Panchayat swiftly initiated the long-overdue construction work. Within a day, construction materials were delivered to the site, and the road construction commenced promptly. In an astonishing display of efficiency and dedication, the road was completed within a week.

Key Findings of the Dekh-Parakh Survey on Social Security Pensions:

1. Incorrect Account Numbers: Around 5% of the surveyed households/individuals had incorrect account numbers registered in the pension portals. In some cases, the account numbers belonged to someone else, leading to non-payment of pensions.
2. Bank Account Linkage: Approximately 23% of pension holders were not receiving pensions due to their bank accounts not being linked with Aadhaar. This requirement posed a challenge for beneficiaries who were dependent on Panchayats and administration to meet the conditions.
3. Deceased Pension Holders: 1% of entitlement holders were reported as deceased, but their names were not deleted from the Samagra Portal of the government. As a result, they continued to appear on the list of pension holders, leading to improper distribution of funds.
4. Temporary or Permanent Migration: Another 6% of households had temporarily or permanently migrated, making it difficult to verify their eligibility. It was likely that their bank accounts were already suspended, further hindering pension disbursement.
5. Unaware Beneficiaries: Approximately 2% of beneficiaries were receiving pensions without being aware of it. The presence of multiple accounts for different schemes confused the beneficiaries, and they received pensions in accounts they were not even aware of.

Overall, the survey highlighted challenges related to incorrect account numbers, bank account linkage, unprocessed updates for deceased pension holders, migration-related issues, and beneficiaries' lack of awareness about their pension payments. These findings shed light on the difficulties faced by socially/economically poor individuals in accessing their entitled social security pensions.

Determined to Ensure Entitlements: Lalita Didi, an active Dekh Parakh Sainik from Naganwadi Panchayat in the Rajpur Block of Badwani District after receiving training on various portals, including Samagra and M-Pension Mitra was determined to ensure that every deserving person in her village received their entitled benefits. She wholeheartedly engaged in a campaign initiated by Samarthan to improve access to social security pensions. Lalita visited each household listed on the Samagra portal for pension-related matters. To her surprise, she discovered that many eligible individuals had stopped receiving their pensions for extended periods. Reasons varied from unlinked Aadhaar numbers to pensions being deposited into suspended accounts, rendering the funds inaccessible. Lalita also uncovered cases where approved pensions were being diverted to someone else due to mismatched account numbers. Lalita diligently collected evidence and testimonies from the beneficiaries and assisted 23 people, ensuring their pensions were reinstated.Lalita's determination to bring justice and support to those in need has transformed the lives of many.

In another case the Dekh-Parakh Sainik Surjit Singh identified Rania and Maharania, a mother and daughter duo who have been struggling to receive their for social security pensions. Their issue was brought before the media. Recognizing the plight of poor pensioners, the district authorities swiftly sanctioned pensions for Rania and Maharania within two days. Additionally, the administration launched a campaign to identify all eligible social security entitlement holders. Through a Panchayat level campaign, approximately 450 pension cases were added within a month, ensuring prompt access to pensions for those in need.

These success stories exemplify the power of dedicated individuals like Lalita Didi and Surjit Singh, who tirelessly advocate for the rights of the marginalized and work towards a more equitable society.

Outcomes and Impact:

The Dekh-Parakh initiative had a significant impact on accountability, service delivery, and community empowerment.

1. **Strengthened Accountability:** The Dekh-Parakh initiative fostered a greater sense of responsibility among stakeholders involved in program implementation. By empowering communities to identify and report inaccuracies in scheme portals, it promoted transparency and held authorities accountable for their actions.
2. **Enhanced Service Delivery:** Through its meticulous data validation and proactive monitoring, the initiative helped improve the efficiency and effectiveness of social security programs. Beneficiaries received their entitled benefits in a timely manner, while leakages and corrupt practices were minimized, leading to improved service delivery.

3. **Empowered Communities:** The active participation of local youth as Dekh-Parakh Sainiks empowered communities to take charge of their entitlements. By enhancing their digital literacy and providing them with tools to access and utilize e-governance platforms, the initiative empowered individuals to demand their rights and actively monitor the implementation of programs.

4. **Potential for Scalability:** The success of the Dekh-Parakh initiative demonstrated its scalability potential. The utilization of trained community monitors and existing mechanisms can be replicated in other regions, leading to the strengthening of accountability, transparency, and service delivery across a broader spectrum.

The Dekh-Parakh initiative literary means see (Dekh) the information on entitlements in the official website and portals and verify (Parakh) by reaching to the community. This is a powerful process of holding the service providing agencies accountable and enabling the entitlement holders to ascertain their claims which was diverted or not targeted due to administrative lapses and irregularities at the ground level. This is a powerful way of community engagement and use of web based technology in promoting transparency and accountability in governance. By bridging the gap between scheme portals and ground realities, the initiative achieved remarkable outcomes, including enhanced accountability, improved service delivery, and empowered communities. Its success sets a precedent for similar initiatives to be adopted and scaled up.