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# The Local Economic Governance Program: Notes for Practitioners

By Verité Research

## Digitisation of Land Records: Pilot Project



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# Digitisation of Land Records: Pilot Project

## Background

The Asia Foundation (TAF) Local Economic Governance (LEG) project along with the Jaffna Municipal Council (MC) piloted the digitisation of land records to improve accessibility of the records and improve the efficiency of document processing and related services including payment of assessment taxes. In Jaffna, the poor condition of the existing paper records necessitated digitisation to salvage and restore the records to a usable state.

The Jaffna MC process served as a pilot project for testing the cost and effort involved in digitizing and records. TAF staff and Jaffna MC staff both concurred that the process was long, costly and difficult taking over seven months to implement. While the protracted conflict certainly exacerbated the problems faced by the Jaffna MC and posed unique challenges, others are likely to also be present in other councils. The limitations in the time-frame of the LEG project meant that this process was not replicated in other local authorities (LAs).<sup>1</sup>

## Process

- Salvaging of records – most records had suffered from water damage and were poorly organised. Therefore, the MC with financial support from TAF had to organise a process of salvaging and cleaning records. The digitization process could only begin after the paper records had been restored to become sufficiently usable.
- Classification and creating unique identification codes – once salvaged all documents had to be filed manually and organised to provide a basis on which to create a new digitised system of organising land records.
- Scanning – each salvaged record also needed to be individually scanned for the purpose of incorporating records into the new system.
- Creating a digitised system for land records – TAF commissioned the creation of a software system for digitizing land records by matching the filing system numbers to a scanned digital copy.

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<sup>1</sup> Subhakaran, A. Interview with LEG Deputy Director. 2016. in person.

- Staff training on managing the new system – TAF conducted training for the Jaffna MC staff on accessing, managing and updating the new system.<sup>2</sup>

## **Outcomes**

The intervention allowed the Jaffna MC to start handling a multiplicity of land related issues including resuming the collection of assessment taxes and arrears from past years. The process has placed the MC, previously unable to access its land records, in a position to do so faster than most LAs are able to due to a general reliance on paper records across most LAs in Sri Lanka.<sup>3</sup>

The major gain in efficiency is the ability of municipal staff to now access records without going through the process of accessing paper records improving efficiency in managing processes including that of assessment taxes, a major source of revenue.

## **Limitations**

The functionality of the digitised system is limited to improving access and creating a durable archiving system of land records. In interviews, TAF staff noted that it falls short of a system for managing all the different land related services LAs provide and the different related needs. The system can improve efficiency in record keeping and access but cannot deal with processing building permits nor is all the information on the scanned record available in digitised searchable form.

## **Lessons Learnt and Potential for Institutionalisation**

While some problems such as the long and costly salvaging process is unlikely to be a major impediment across LAs in the manner encountered in Jaffna, other issues are likely to exist. Imperfect record keeping is not completely unique to war affected LAs and the process of automating payments<sup>4</sup> has demonstrated that moving to digitization can be costly and difficult. It nevertheless has universal application in terms of efficiency gains and durability by shifting away from relying wholly on inefficient manual record keeping that is also vulnerable to physical damage.

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<sup>2</sup> C, Sasiharan. Interview with LEG Programme Officer (Northern and Eastern Provinces). 2016. in person.

<sup>3</sup> Municipal Council, Staff. 2016. Excerpt from interviews. in person. Jaffna.

<sup>4</sup> See *Citizen Friendly Payment Systems*

Similar to the digitization process carried out for tax payments, the digitisation of land records can have natural incentives for sustainability as it aids the internal processes of a LA, including revenue generation. The 'buy-in' by both bureaucrats and politicians can therefore be sustained, once it has been initially secured. Securing the initial buy-in for a difficult shift is likely to vary among LAs as it requires a significant time commitment and may result in incurring costs of transition.

Despite the limitations noted above, the system of digitizing land records has some tangible benefits and could be implemented even amidst severe constraints. This suggests a high degree of replicability and is supported by the cost advantage for LAs due to the fact that the significant initial investment in developing a software system is not required for implementation.

## References

1. A, Subhakaran. Interview with LEG Deputy Director. 2016. in person. Jaffna.
2. C, Sasiharan. Interview with LEG Programme Officer (Northern and Eastern Provinces). 2016. in person. Jaffna.
3. Municipal Council, Staff. 2016. Excerpt from interviews. in person. Jaffna.

## **Annexure 1 – Semi-Structured Questionnaire for TAF staff**

1. What was the primary purpose and expected outcome of introducing the tool/s to local authorities?
2. What was the response of local authorities to the tool?
3. What was their level of enthusiasm when the tool was first introduced? (scale of 1-10, 10 the being highest value)
4. Where was it implemented? Please list all locations
5. What was the level of implementation at each location? Please list appropriate level for each location (early stages/partially implemented/fully implemented)
6. Please list out the implementation process followed at each location.
7. What were the main changes and outcomes to the LA as a result of implementing the tool? Please list any empirical evidence to support the changes and outcomes mentioned.
8. What were the major challenges to implementing the tool
9. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest) how would you rate the success of the tool and why?

## **Annexure 2: Unstructured Case Study Questionnaire for Key Informant Interviews**

### **A. Case Study Objectives:**

1. Getting to a comprehensive understanding of how The Asia Foundation (TAF) has “navigated the complexities and realities of power and politics in the Local Economic Governance (LEG) Program” (This includes all three strands/domains being addressed in the Practice Notes)
2. Unpacking the dynamic nature of the institutional and organizational structures and processes (political/social/economic/legal/other) at the local government level (LG) that have facilitated (or failed to facilitate) TAF’s key objectives of replication, institutionalization and innovation embedded in the following Program Components: improved local economic governance; increased economic and social development opportunities; and, empowerment for social inclusion and peace
3. Exploring how political and economic incentives were built to provide citizen-centric services
4. Documenting/highlighting the value-addition that the LEG Program provides to the existing body of conceptual and empirical knowledge

### **B. Questions for Unstructured KPIs:**

1. Has TAF’s LEG Program (and the three strands/domains embedded in this Program) been successful in terms of its stated objectives (as set out in Case Study Objective 2 above and as reflected specifically in the sub-objectives underpinning the three strands addressed in the Practice Notes)? Has the Program failed to realize these objectives?



- a) Please identify the key supply and demand-side enabling factors that have contributed to the success of the Program. These factors may include political/social/legal/economic/technical/other institutional/organizational structures and processes at the LG level and in the relevant public policy space (such as factors associated with national/provincial government, donor practices, other development partners such as the private sector/Regional Chambers, citizen groups, etc.).
  - b) Please identify the key supply and demand-side factors that have undermined the success of the Program.
  - c) Please identify key procedural elements that stand out as “innovative”/“novel” in the LEG Program.
2. How have the strategic political economy approaches and tools adopted by TAF in the LEG Program worked in practice?
- a) What are the “political” incentives that have worked to make the Program a success?
  - b) What are the “political” disincentives that have undermined the success of the Program?
  - c) To what extent has the strategy of “working closely with political actors” (including “political champions”) been useful in terms of realizing the objectives of the LEG Program? Explain for instance, how these “champions” have negotiated the challenge of getting broad buy-in/political ownership for the reform process. Has political competition and comparison played a role in shaping the incentives and behavior of these political actors?
  - d) To what extent has the strategy of “working closely with political actors” (including “political champions”) led to new risks that have in turn undermined the success of the LEG Program?
  - e) How has the role of bureaucrats (as distinct from politicians) been balanced and contextualized in the Program?

- f) Has the existing “political context” had an impact in terms of the success/failure of the Program? If so, how (explain the dynamics of the link between the “political context” and the success/failure of the Program)? Explain how the specifics of Sri Lanka’s local governance context have impacted on the LEG Program. Explain how the Program has addressed issues such as rent-seeking/corruption and political favoritism. Explain how the LEG Program has navigated institutional realities during and after the civil war (including the nature of the state, of the state-citizen nexus, of the role of other development partners- for instance, the private sector and the donor community).
  - g) Explain how the LEG Program has addressed the issue of trust deficit in Sri Lanka’s civil society and facilitated and embedded citizen “voice” mechanisms (and the active participation of citizens in the broader socio-economic development and political governance process) – particularly in relation to the empowerment of vulnerable and marginalized communities.
  - h) How has the “politics” of governance been blended with the “imperative” of economic growth in the Program?
3. To what extent can the strategic political economy approaches and tools underpinning the LEG Program be replicated – in other localities in Sri Lanka/by TAF in future programs/by other donors?
- What are the key “good practice” lessons as well as major shortcomings that may be useful for practitioners (Sri Lankan policy makers, the donor community, other key actors in this particular public policy space, etc.) attempting to replicate this “model”?