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## Reaching the unreached? Good governance and welfare reform politics in Delhi, India

Richa Dhanju\* and Kathleen O'Reilly

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Good governance scholarship has been preoccupied with the donor-driven conditionalities imposed on aid-receiving developing countries. Limited attention has been given to power struggles and resistance from government actors (bureaucrats and politicians) to embrace internally driven good governance programmes. To address this gap, this article ethnographically examines a good governance initiative of the Delhi government (India) to reform its welfare system in partnership with NGOs. The study indicates that the conflict between government and non-governmental actors over the authority to govern the poor eventually maintained the status quo of the welfare system while the poor remain marginalised.

Les experts en bonne gouvernance s'inquiètent des conditionnalités imposées par les bailleurs de fonds aux pays en développement récipiendaires d'aide. Une attention limitée a été accordée aux luttes de pouvoir et à la résistance des acteurs gouvernementaux (bureaucrates et politiques) concernant l'adoption de programmes de bonne gouvernance impulsés depuis l'intérieur. Pour combler cette lacune, cet article examine sous un angle ethnographique une initiative liée à la bonne gouvernance lancée par le gouvernement de Delhi (Inde) pour réformer son système de sécurité sociale en partenariat avec des ONG. L'étude indique que le conflit entre les acteurs gouvernementaux et non gouvernementaux concernant l'autorité de gouverner les pauvres a fini par maintenir le *statu quo* du système de sécurité sociale, tandis que les pauvres sont restés marginalisés.

Las investigaciones en torno a la buena gobernanza se han centrado en analizar las condicionalidades establecidas por los donantes, impuestas a los países en desarrollo receptores de asistencia. Sin embargo, se ha puesto menos atención a las luchas por el poder y a la resistencia generada por los actores gubernamentales (burócratas y políticos) ante los programas de buena gobernanza impulsados por una dirección autogestiva. Con el fin de subsanar esta laguna, el presente artículo examina de manera etnográfica la iniciativa de buena gobernanza impulsada por el gobierno de Delhi (India), la cual, en colaboración con varias ONG, se orienta a reformar su sistema de bienestar. El estudio revela que el conflicto en torno a quién debe ejercer la autoridad para gobernar a los pobres, establecido entre los actores gubernamentales y no gubernamentales, determinó que a la larga se mantuviera el *statu quo* del sistema de bienestar, mientras los pobres permanecen marginados.

**Keywords:** Aid – Development policies; Civil society – NGOs; Partnership; Governance and public policy; Labour and livelihoods – Poverty reduction; South Asia

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## Introduction

Prasad<sup>1</sup> resided in a slum in Delhi,<sup>2</sup> India's capital. Sitting outside his one-room shanty on a hot afternoon in 2009, he shared news about a recent good governance initiative of the Delhi government (henceforth 'DG') that was implemented in partnership with local NGOs.<sup>3</sup> This initiative, known as Project Vikaas (henceforth 'Project'), was established as a flagship project of the DG in 2008 to simplify and expand welfare services for millions of poor Delhi residents. After decades of experiencing ineffective or absent welfare services, Prasad believed that "*sarkaar ne apna mann badal diya* [the government had a change of mind]". But he was not fully convinced. Between excitement and confusion, Prasad wondered aloud, "*But why now is the government reforming welfare?*"

Rajan, project coordinator for an NGO-run Project centre, worked in Prasad's slum. All other 120 Project centres across Delhi were also run by NGOs. They provided the services listed in Table 1. Rajan enthusiastically explained the Project's motto, "reaching the unreached" and its implementation through NGO-run centres that enabled the Delhi government to extend its welfare services to the poorest people. Project centres literally met people where they were lived.

The DG spends approximately Rs. 700 crore (US\$153 million) each year on various social welfare schemes (*Outlook* 2008). However, less than 50% of this amount reaches the needy (Project documents 2009). Before the reforms of the Project, elected politicians and welfare bureaucrats were in charge of this welfare system. Bribery, confusing regulations across multiple welfare departments, lengthy paperwork, and long waiting periods distanced the poor from benefiting from these services. This dysfunctional system routinised, instead of ameliorated, the everyday suffering of the poor. Rajan believed the Project would eradicate this suffering by transferring the authority of politicians and welfare bureaucrats to community-based NGOs. Prasad's confusion and Rajan's optimism collectively grasp the complex relationship between the government and poor citizens. Services and money were available, but corruption and bureaucratic red tape prevented their effective delivery to the poor. The Project intended to change that.

The Project was a good governance initiative of the DG involving a government-NGO partnership; NGOs embedded across low-income areas in Delhi were contractually employed as the DG's partners. In the context of the Project, good governance was defined as a strategy to make the government efficient by: (a) reforming its systems; and (b) replacing traditional actors with new efficient ones, like NGOs. An ethnographic examination of the Project revealed two related things. First, the DG did not trust itself. It was well aware that the dysfunctional welfare system resulted from corruption and apathy within the government, so it strove to change it for the benefit of poor urban citizens. Second, in light of its own weaknesses, the DG could not reform its welfare system without excluding the actors that constituted it, that is, the democratically elected politicians that comprised it. Therefore, the DG looked outward to reform its welfare system; it replaced politicians and bureaucrats with over 120 NGOs as

Table 1. Services offered by Project Vikaas.

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1. Streamline identification of eligible welfare recipients and delivery of welfare services through NGOs.
  2. Community based centres operated by local NGOs to deliver welfare services at the doorsteps of the poor.
  3. Free and certified vocational training activities for poor women offered at the NGO-run centres.
  4. Definition of poverty expanded to include social, spatial, and occupational vulnerability.
  5. Door-to-door surveys conducted with NGO partners and community members to identify more citizens eligible for the different welfare services.
-

“partners”. As a result of this replacement, DG expanded the definition of government to include NGOs (Table 2). The “internalisation” of NGOs sparked a rebellion by excluded actors that ultimately undermined the Project.

The need to replace government actors with new actors highlights the fragmented and heterogeneous nature of the government. The term “government” holds abstract and material meanings. To govern is the “*conduct of conduct*” (Gordon 1991, 48), and it is materialised through tangible political, bureaucratic, and civil society institutions, such as the welfare office where citizens wait for services. Beyond the tangible presence of the government, its discursive construction is also important, and one that highlights how citizens understand, access, resist, or comply with it in everyday life (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). The government is not a monolithic entity with one agenda. Multiple actors with diverse agendas constitute and challenge the government (Li 2005). Broadly, governance is what a government does. It is “*the prevailing pattern by which public power is exercised in a given social context*” (Jenkins 2002, 485).

In development scholarship, good governance meanings have been explored in foreign donor-aided public service programmes (Weiss 2000; Doornbos 2004; Mawdsley, Townsend, and Porter 2005; Pettai and Illing 2004), state drives for efficiency (Corbridge et al. 2005; Chakrabarti 2007), and collaborations between NGOs and the middle class to shore up elite power in urban government (Harriss 2007). Government’s interest in improving public services for its citizens, alongside global economic pressures to attract trade and bolster tourism, collectively determines a government’s internal focus on good governance (Corbridge et al. 2005; Mahadevia 2011). This understanding indicates that good governance remains influenced by the Washington Consensus (i.e. efficiency, accountability, democratisation, and individual responsibility [Mawdsley, Townsend, and Porter 2005]), even though it has some recent local/internal manifestations.

This article’s findings go against the grain of majority scholarship by demonstrating that good governance is more nuanced than decentralising government authority through people’s participation and non-governmental partnerships. New actors (e.g. NGOs) inside the government (Table 2) challenged traditional actors in ways previously unexamined in the governance literature. The current article contributes to governance scholarship by exploring how an expanded definition of government meant that governance reforms were undermined from the inside to the detriment of the poor. The poor remained on the margins as traditional and new government actors locked horns over who should have the authority to do the “good” in good governance. This paper also adds to an understanding of reform by examining the complex relationships between those who drive governance reforms, the reforms undertaken, and their outcomes.

The 12-month-long ethnography conducted between 2008 and 2010 was informed by numerous informal and semi-structured interviews with 65 informants, including residents of four informal colonies in East and North East Delhi, the three elected politicians representing the four colonies (among other areas), staff of partnering NGOs working in the four Project centres at these colonies, and government officers and consultants working at the Project’s headquarters.

Table 2. Actors that constitute Delhi government.

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**A. Traditional actors:**

1. Elected politicians: (1) members of the state legislative assembly; (2) ward counsellors
2. Bureaucrats: state-level civil servants administering all state departments, including the nine departments that provide 40+ social welfare services
3. Staff: *Babus* or lower level state employees. The first line of contact between the government and the citizens

**B. New actors:**

1. 1200+ NGO staff working as DG partners through the Project (10 staff members per NGO).
  2. 50+ government bureaucrats and private consultants working at the Project headquarters.
-

Observation of meetings between government and NGO staff along with regular visits to the community with NGO staff highlighted partnership dynamics and the ways that the Project was understood (or not) by its beneficiaries. Further, secondary and archival data gathered from government documents, newspapers, and the Project website were analysed alongside recurring triangulation of information received from different informants. Preliminary findings were shared with DG officials and Project staff.

The paper is divided into five sections: first, some background explaining the emergence of Project Vikaas; second, a review of the literature on good governance; third, an ethnographic examination of the ground realities of good governance; fourth, a discussion of the findings; and finally, concluding remarks.

### **Background: “but why now is the government reforming welfare?”**

Prasad’s question “*But why now is the government reforming welfare?*” hints at the confusion surrounding the urban development paradigm of large Indian cities like Delhi. In his question is awareness that the government could have reformed welfare sooner, but did not. Kundu (2013) notes that India’s political economy push larger cities to attract global investments, thus prioritising infrastructural improvement projects at the expense of pro-poor reforms. However, Mahadevia (2011) reminds us that infrastructural improvement is not the sole priority of the government. She suggests that urban development in India is marred by a “*paradigm of deliberate confusion*” swinging between two polarities – the pressure to build world-class cities that exclude the poor, and, to include the poor through pro-poor policies. While several scholars have drawn attention to the plight of the poor in aspiring world-class cities like Delhi (Baviskar 2006, 2010; Dupont and Ramathanan 2007; Menon-Sen and Bhan 2008; Bhan 2009; Batra 2010; Dupont 2011), few have taken note of the government’s simultaneous efforts to make the welfare system efficient and targeted (Rao 2013). Rao notes that while large-scale welfare programmes continue to be rolled out, “*the goalposts for administering them are shifting*” (2013, 72–73). This paper highlights the shifting goalposts in Delhi’s welfare system, and the repercussions that followed.

According to the UN’s World Urbanization Prospect, Delhi is the world’s second largest city, after Tokyo (*Hindustan Times*, July 11, 2014). According to the Delhi Human Development Report (Government of National Capital Region of Delhi, 2006), forty-five percent of the 25 million Delhi residents live in slums or slum-like conditions. At least 200,000 people migrate to Delhi every year, out of which 50,000 make slums their new home (Puri and Bhatia 2009). Considering the ill-effects of growing urban disparities on urban foreign investment, the DG ran contradictory programmes of poverty reduction alongside infrastructural development that excluded the poor. As a result, the DG’s policies entered Mahadevia’s “*paradigm of deliberate confusion*” (Mahadevia 2011). The DG surely recognised the mutually exclusive nature of both its initiatives, but nevertheless continued with their simultaneous implementation – keeping both pro-poor and pro-development sides appeased, while confusing common citizens like Prasad of its real intentions.

Within this paradigm, the Project was the new goalpost for administering Delhi’s welfare system. It was established in 2008 to make the welfare system expansive and efficient, one that promised to “reached the unreached”. The Project was internally funded by the DG, with United Nations and World Bank staff in Delhi consulting on its design and implementation. The Project was registered as an independent non-governmental organisation under the Societies Registration Act 1860, but it operated as a Government Organized NGO (GONGO). It was funded by the DG, led by the chief minister (governor) of Delhi, managed by a government bureaucrat, and implemented on the ground by NGOs. The section below examines the dynamics that impacted welfare’s new goalpost within the context of scholarly discussion of good governance.

### Good governance: who is doing good, for whom?

Scholarship on public service reforms in developing countries mostly focuses on decentralisation through privatisation and commercialisation as neo-liberal logics for efficiency (O'Reilly and Dhanju 2014). In the case of the Project, the DG applied the principle of subsidiarity, broadly understood as “*any particular task should be decentralized to the lowest level of governance with the capacity to conduct it satisfactorily*” (Marshall 2007, 80). NGOs were therefore contracted by the state because of their efficiency and connection to the urban grassroots (Mawdsley et al. 2005), effectively creating new goalposts for welfare reform in the name of good governance.

What constitutes “good” governance has been hotly debated. The concept of good governance was introduced by the World Bank in 1989 as a prerequisite for aid to low-income countries in an effort to “fix” governments in the Global South. Common principles associated with good governance are accountability, efficiency, participation, absence of corruption, transparency, equity, devolution of power, human rights, and the rule of law (Van Doeveren 2011, 307). Foreign donors expected NGOs to act as “*vehicles of democratization*” while also making goods and services efficiently available to the poor (Ghosh 2009, 231). Despite the laundry list of principles there is no consensus on a clear definition of good governance (Weiss 2000; Corbridge et al. 2005, 158; Andrews 2008).

Scholarship on good governance has been preoccupied with the donor-driven conditionalities imposed on aid-receiving developing countries (Doornbos 2001; Brinkerhoff 2003; Nanda 2006; Hope 2009; Kim 2009; Parnini 2009). The assumption is that developing countries are disinterested in good governance unless forced by the lure of foreign aid. A gap remains in understanding the dynamics of good governance programmes implemented by state or national governments without donor conditionalities or foreign aid. Corbridge et al. (2005, 186) posit that good governance is increasingly becoming a priority of national and state governments concerned with the welfare of its marginalised citizens. Contrary to claims of depoliticisation, these authors believe that good governance strategies provide a counter-space for interaction between the government and poor citizens. However, in the case of the Project we see that NGOs mediate interactions as state representatives, not the government itself. Tensions over whether or not NGOs were government contractors, agents of the state, or internal to the state itself drove the demise of the good governance reforms.

Limited scholarship attends to power struggles and the resistance from government actors (bureaucrats and politicians) to embrace good governance (Brinkerhoff 2003; Ackerman 2004). This deserves more attention, especially when good governance programmes are initiated by the government and involve devolution of power from government to non-governmental actors. Ackerman (2004, 448) defines good governance as a conflict-ridden process which “*does not emerge spontaneously or naturally out of the good hearts of individual bureaucrats and politicians*”. Once the good governance programme is implemented on the ground, it engages multiple actors – old (politicians) and new (NGOs). As old actors share power with new ones, resistance and conflicts are bound to emerge. We argue below that unexamined tensions between NGOs, local politicians, those they represent, and the government of which they are a part, drove DG to cannibalise its own initiative. We find that government-introduced good governance can disturb power structures entrenched in everyday political and administrative tasks. Below, we examine the daily encounters comprising the DG’s internally driven good governance initiative. The story that emerges is a struggle over who and what constitutes government within the government itself, leaving poor citizens and NGOs on the political sidelines.

### Internal dissent in the Delhi government

During a visit to the NGO-run Project centre in Prasad’s slum, the following scene unfolded: elderly women and men, widows, disabled persons, and others formed a long line outside the

centre to apply for financial assistance through the welfare system.<sup>4</sup> Inside the centre, women slum residents attended vocational training classes like tailoring, arts and craft-making, and basic computer skills. Gendered skills training is in keeping with neo-liberal ideals of self-sufficiency that have very little attachment to structural causes of gendered economic inequality or understandings of empowerment (Batliwala 1994; Rowlands 1997; Harris 2009). While these training activities were popular, it was the promise of hassle-free welfare services that attracted large crowds of poor community members.

Traditional actors – politicians and staff at the eight welfare-providing departments that previously managed the approval of eligible welfare recipients (Figure 1) – were replaced by partnering NGOs (Figure 2). Previously, the networks through which government benefits reached the poor were embroiled in bribes, graft, and political patronage.<sup>5</sup> With around one million welfare recipients and approximately two million more becoming eligible through the Project's redefinition of poverty and the door-to-door enumeration of poor neighbourhoods, the economic and political gains were expected to double for key welfare authorities.<sup>6</sup> The Project shifted the long lines of welfare-seeking poor citizens from local politicians' offices and welfare departments to the NGO-run centres. The poor still had to stand in queues, but they did not travel long distances to multiple offices, or pay bribes. Several politicians and welfare department staff realised that the new NGO-oriented system would distance them from the poor and hence weaken their potential political and economic gains (Figure 2).<sup>7</sup>

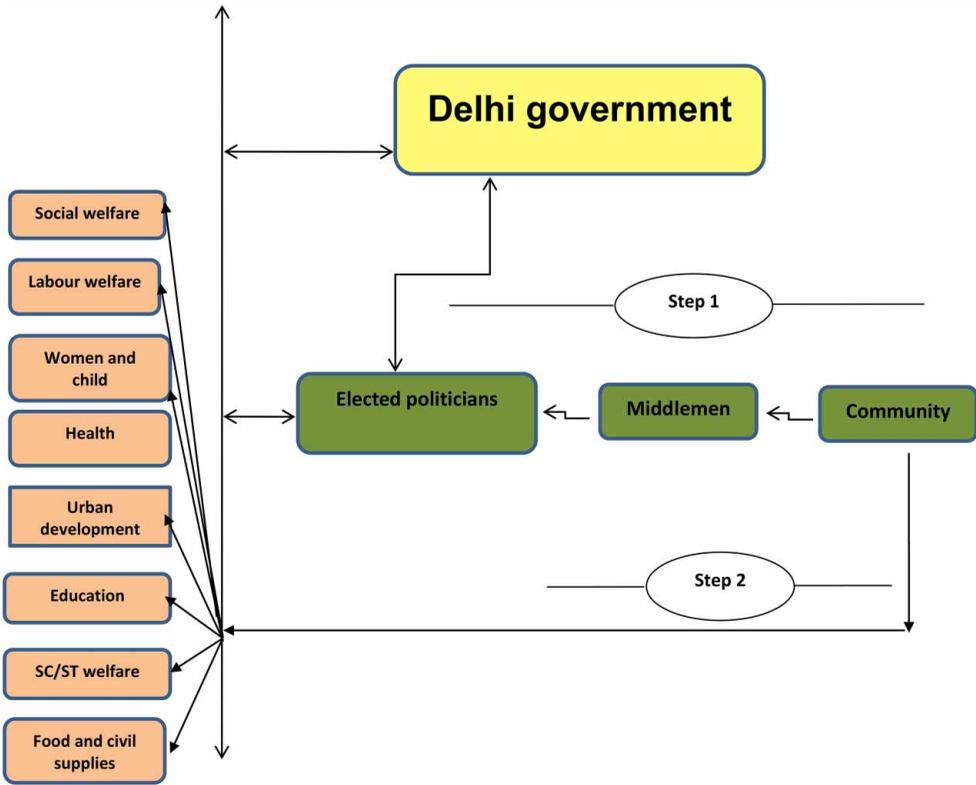


Figure 1. Welfare delivery in Delhi prior to Project Vikas.

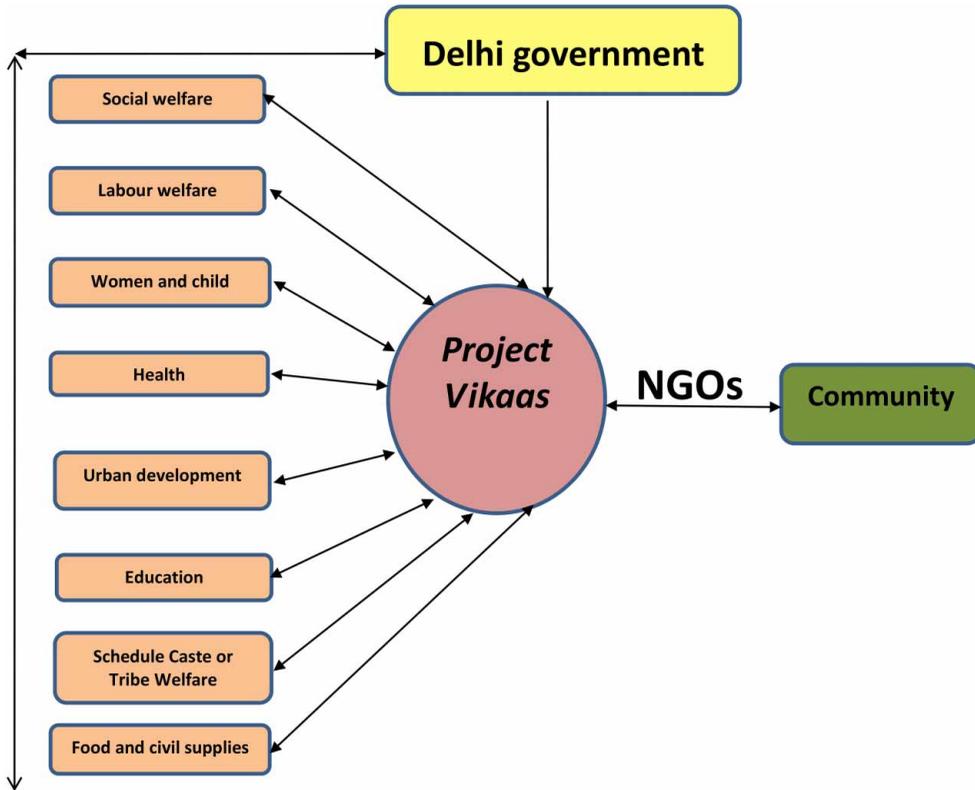


Figure 2. Welfare delivery in Delhi after implementation of Project Vikaas.

### Government versus NGOs: challenges of a partnership

In a magazine interview, the director of the Project noted that while the government can provide resources, technical support, and oversight, it is NGOs who enable community engagement and mobilisation.<sup>8</sup> Adaptability in operations and cost-effectiveness explained why NGOs were the best partners to reach those previously unreached by traditional government arrangements. She introduced flexibility in the definition of who constituted the government and who could serve the poor. The words of a prominent government official on the first anniversary celebration of the Project in 2009 signalled another shift:

“Earlier the onus was on beneficiaries to gain access to their benefits. Through the Project, efforts are being made to deliver the knowledge and benefits of the schemes directly to the people.”

While good governance strategies may suggest a calculated distancing of the government from its citizens for efficiency’s sake, the Project emphasised actually bridging that distance, albeit through contracted partners.

Those contracted partners believed that the Project worked better than the government, as heard in the words of Mani, an NGO staffer:

“There are no long lines here and we are polite to them. We don’t ask for paperwork; we provide unconditional services and we are located inside their community. The government is not like this.”

In comparison, it was common knowledge that the government was difficult to access, provided inefficient services (e.g. long waits for welfare services), and its paperwork was too complicated for the illiterate poor to understand. By shifting authority from traditional actors who constituted the government, to new ones, NGOs, the DG ignited debates about who had the authority to serve the poor.

Local politicians perceived NGOs as government contractors lacking the legitimacy to manage the welfare system – a system that is synonymous with government. Mahesh, a third-time elected politician, expressed these concerns:

“The government is going private ... it is wasting money on NGOs in the name of partnership ... what are we sitting here for if the [welfare] schemes will be given out through NGOs?”

Mahesh's complaint about the government going private was an exaggeration, having little connection to economic meanings of privatisation, that is, government capital put into private hands for the sake of profit. NGOs certainly had vested economic interests, but they were not working for profit. The Project's NGO partners were yearly contractors to whom the DG outsourced its welfare operations. Regardless, the notion of “*the government is going private*” eventually gained impetus to reverse the changes and derail the Project's ability to reform welfare.

Another politician criticised NGOs for interfering with his responsibilities. Ramesh was an incumbent ruling party politician representing a constituency with alarming rates of poverty. He was aware of the rampant corruption in the welfare delivery process and acknowledged that his own assistants sought bribes from constituents. But Ramesh was not convinced that NGOs were the solution to the inefficient welfare system. He said:

“It is the duty of a government to look after the well-being of its people. Welfare provision should not be given to NGOs. Their duty should be to identify the needy and tell us. That's all, the rest we are capable enough to manage. After all, that is why people elect us.”

Ramesh called himself the ‘government’ – an established, dutiful authority *and* a democratically elected provider for the citizens. In contrast, he viewed NGOs as informed yet informal mechanisms that could peripherally assist him/government but must not interfere with his/its authority to serve the poor. Ramesh made clear that he was a part of the government, and therefore had the same goals. NGOs were neither elected nor part of the DG thus they should assist, but not manage.

Raman was a ruling party politician and a prominent cabinet minister in the DG. On being asked whether politicians were willing to be flexible and follow the Project's practices for reaching vulnerable populations, Raman said:

“How can a politician trace each and every vulnerable person in the community? If a person is poor and expects welfare benefits then he should go to the politician. Tell me, does the well go to the thirsty person or the thirsty person to the well?”

Raman's views were contradictory to the Project's philosophy of making the government reach the doorsteps of the poor. He also likened the government to an immovable object around which the needy must flock. Raman expected the poor, despite their lack of information, time, and money to reach the government, prove their poverty, and access their own welfare benefits. His expectations were in stark contrast to the Project's ideology. In essence, good governance concepts like efficiency, cost-effectiveness, inclusion, and participation made little sense to those losing their powers to NGOs through a programme run by the government they constituted. The politicians were clear that good governance principles should not interfere with their political authority to serve citizens.

In order to prove their eligibility to serve the poor, politicians and NGOs accused each other of corruption. While politicians like Raman stated that NGOs sought favours from him to get donor funding, some NGO staff exposed welfare fraud of politicians. Further, whether the actors were elected leaders or selected partners became a contentious point in determining their authority over the welfare system. On the one hand, politicians believed that NGOs had no right to serve the poor because they were not democratically elected by the poor. The opposition party politician Mahesh noted that:

“I used to personally supervise that the right people get the scheme ... why would these NGOs take so much pain? They will keep getting their money from the government but we won't get votes if we don't give people what they want.”

Mahesh connected NGOs with the need for funds and politicians with the need for votes. He also clearly established the relationship between votes and welfare while defining NGOs as apolitical and unaccountable. Similarly, cabinet minister Raman viewed NGOs as “*paise banana ka dhandha* [money-making business]”.

On the other hand, NGOs argued that they were in fact better suited to provide welfare services because of the same reasons – their lack of interest in vote politics and a history of unbiased service. These were the reasons, they explained, that had convinced DG to select NGOs to replace politicians. Tushar was the programme director at one of the Project centres. Irked by money-making accusations by resistant politicians, he dug out past welfare records and found that the local politician in his area had diverted large amounts of welfare funds to his middle-class friends by documenting them as poor. Tushar noted:

“This is not a unique case. This is what you will find in each and every constituency. No wonder they [the DG] wants NGOs to step in now. We are an NGO ... we are not interested in getting votes. So we go and help the ones who really need help.”

A tug of war between election versus selection altered the terms of the debate. Which actor was eligible to serve poor citizens took precedence over how best to make welfare services beneficial for them.

### ***Conflict, competition, and community backlash***

By the end of 2009, Project NGOs had extensive outreach in their respective communities. They had added over 10,000 people to the welfare roster and assured several thousand that welfare services would soon become a reality for them. Project NGOs reached people like Sunita. A 40-year-old widow, Sunita had resided in a slum for over a decade. She collected recyclable garbage to sell in the wholesale recycling market for a monthly income of Rs. 2000 (US\$40). She possessed no official papers documenting her poverty, which were required to avail welfare services in the pre-Project welfare system. She had never availed any welfare services from the government and was unaware that she was eligible for the Rs. 1000 (US\$20) monthly widow pension. While conducting door-to-door surveys, her name was added to the list of women eligible for widow pension by the Project staff. Sunita's documents were in the process of being verified and she was hopeful that her monthly pension would start soon. She said: “*Had these people not come to do my survey, I would have never known about the 1000 rupees that I could get every month!*” Sunita's case indicated that partnering NGOs' work at the grassroots made it possible for the welfare-entitled to be added to the welfare system. But this did not translate into the smooth or quick receipt of welfare for Sunita.

Pressure on the DG from resistant politicians yielded changes in the Project's policies. Local politicians were reintroduced in the welfare process towards the end of 2009. As such, NGOs and politicians uncomfortably shared the authority to approve and deliver welfare services. The conflict between new and traditional actors now turned into competition as multiple channels provided the same services to the poor. Satpal, a project coordinator at a partnering NGO, believed that this negative competition worked favourably for the poor. He stated:

“Before the politician used to tell people that get lost, ‘I don’t have any forms.’ He would give no more than 100 forms out for pensions and all. But now the same politician is giving out lots of forms because he sees competition from NGOs that are going to people’s houses and getting forms filled ...”

Challenged by the NGOs’ extensive outreach, some local politicians created new ways of reaching their poor constituents. In addition to dispersing more welfare forms, they also expressed interest in smaller developmental projects in their constituency. According to a community leader, the local politician was now present at ceremonies celebrating the minor achievements in the area. Another NGO worker said that the Project was “*a wake-up call*” for the local politicians.

Politician-NGO competition yielded small yet pleasant changes but it also created more road-blocks for the NGOs. Bipin, a staff member at a Project NGO, resided in a neighbouring resettlement colony. He noted that:

“The social welfare department prioritizes the forms that come from the politicians. Forms from our centre are thrown right down the pile. It has been six months since we started collecting people’s pension [cash assistance] forms but not a single case has received money yet ... people come and ask me, ‘What happened of our forms? If you can’t process them then return them to us. We will submit it with the politician. So what if we have to pay there. At least our work would have been done by now.’”

Since Bipin lived in the same community where he worked, people would often stop him to ask about the status of their forms. “*When I say it will take some more time, they get angry and ask me if I want a bribe to get them their pension.*” NGO staff’s inability to deliver on their promises made several citizens return to the belief that bribery would succeed when nothing else did. NGOs had reached further into poor settlements than any institution previously. While this fulfilled a Project goal, it also led to a perception that NGOs *provided* benefits themselves without reference to the DG welfare offices, thus also eliminating knowledge about the road-blocks that were slowing down NGO work.

Partnering NGOs struggled to meet the expectations of the DG in reaching the unreached. Part of the problem resided in the fact that the DG invested time and money in training NGO staff, but NGO staff remained poorly trained as enrolling citizens was extensive and complex. The DG also gave awards and recognition to NGOs that met its expectations; awards opened up more venues for external funding. NGO staff therefore experienced pressure from their programme directors to enrol large numbers into the welfare system as competition increased between NGOs. Several interviewed NGO staff felt overwhelmed and admitted that performance pressure led staff to complete forms incorrectly or for ineligible persons. Later, incorrect forms were returned from the welfare office. NGOs became easy and often valid targets for local politicians to demand their withdrawal from the welfare system. NGOs’ interest in government funding undermined their participation and cannibalised the Project.

### ***Returning to an altered past***

From the beginning of 2010, politicians actively complained to the chief minister (governor) about the Project's intervention in welfare delivery. The chief minister called a special meeting of all politicians to address their grievances. Predicting a confrontation, the Project director and consultants prepared a presentation highlighting the crucial role politicians can play in the Project's upcoming stages (Project documents accessed in July 2010). However, the presentation was not well received by opposition politicians. They blamed the government for outsourcing important governmental functions to NGOs, thus limiting the role of elected representatives. They questioned the chief minister regarding "*serious irregularities in implementation of the program*" (newspaper article, May 7, 2010). A senior opposition politician also complained that in the last year not a single person has been granted old-age pension through the Project (newspaper article, May 7, 2010). However, the Project's data indicated that this was not true. As of February 2010, NGO-run centres across all nine districts of Delhi had filed 11,229 welfare forms with the welfare department but only 3,414 of these forms had been approved by the department. This shows that less than 37% of the total forms submitted were approved (District-wise status of sanctioning of schemes, Project document, accessed in July 2010). The chief minister found herself in disagreement with several politicians, but was forced to make a decision. The chief minister withdrew all Project officials and NGOs from the delivery of six financial assistance-based welfare schemes with a collective budget nearing US\$100 million in the 2010–11 fiscal year.

The minutes of the meeting on 6 May 2010 (accessed in July 2010) reported that the role of partnering NGOs would be truncated. NGOs would not deliver popular welfare services but would only provide peripheral support to the politicians by: (1) conducting surveys; (2) generating databases (to help with budget allocation of different schemes); (3) creating awareness about different welfare schemes; and (4) delivering direct services for women's empowerment. Politicians acquiesced to the list knowing there were few political or economic gains in these arenas, for example, women's empowerment programmes garner little political attention, funding, or support (O'Reilly 2004). The minutes also stated that "*the department of social welfare shall attach one cadre officer with every partnering NGO to monitor the activities being conducted at these centres*". With the elimination of NGO power to deliver welfare and the addition of their surveillance, the government shifted the goalposts of good governance reform. Partnering NGOs that had previously replaced the welfare department and politicians were now to be monitored by the welfare department as per the demands of the politicians.

Our ethnography tells the story of the extensive reforms and counter-reforms to the welfare system in Delhi. Below we discuss the key themes, their significance for good governance, and their outcomes for the poor.

### **The project as an assemblage: negotiating internal conflicts**

Our ethnography yielded several new insights into good governance. First, good governance reforms emerge in a pre-existing political context, which expands to include new arenas for struggle when new actors are engaged to deliver government services. Existing political contexts (e.g. patronage and corruption) are often what drive good governance initiatives, but disconnecting traditional government actors from their source of power (and income) does not go uncontested. Second, new actors, like NGOs, discover that they also have a stake in the configurations of power that good governance introduces. Both for the sake of their organisations' reputations and their efforts on behalf of their poor clients, NGOs further complicate internal

struggles over good governance. Third, the urban poor as a category of welfare recipients are struggled over, but seem to gain little control over access to their entitlements through good governance reforms. While good governance may succeed in improving government's visibility among the politically marginalised, their political marginalisation remains much the same, and government visibility has little to offer in the way of material benefits that might ease daily struggles of making a living. We explore each of these three insights below.

Li (2005) helps us understand the conflicts and resistance experienced by diverse actors impacted by government programmes like the Project. Li suggests that such programmes do not represent a coherent plan emerging from one authority. Instead, they journey through fragmented objectives, techniques, and knowledge that emerge as a constantly changing "assemblage". As a result, this assemblage is "... always subject to contestation and reformulation by a range of pressures and forces it cannot contain" (Li 2005, 386). Recognising the Project as an assemblage, the ethnography shows that it was constituted *and* disturbed by the multiple traditional and new government actors that struggled over access to the power to distribute benefits to the poor, and the legitimacy to represent them. As examined in the empirical section, the old order of who should constitute the government and who had authority over the welfare of the poor were thrown into disarray. For the elected politicians, electoral politics was synonymous with the "government" – an entity that responded when citizens asked for help, but not before. Welfare benefits were a key piece of profitable patronage relationships with the urban poor. While NGOs asserted that inefficient and corrupt traditional actors prompted the DG to replace them, politicians questioned NGOs' legitimacy to serve the poor without being their democratically-elected leaders. A temporary inclusion of NGOs in the welfare system rattled these previous power relationships, but was never able to entirely dismantle them. The nuanced on-the-ground power plays between NGOs, politicians, and DG leadership indicate the struggles that shape good governance initiatives on the ground.

The tensions that arose between actors newly integrated into the government machinery and traditional ones might have been anticipated by those decision-makers who championed the Project. The political cost of excluding internal members of their own government was cheaper for the DG than enabling the poor to access their entitlements. The government could politically afford to lose the poor, but it could not politically afford to lose the politicians, which constituted it. The government enrolled NGOs not only because of who they were (efficient service deliverers) but also because of who they were not, that is, insiders of government. NGOs were also politically expendable. Poor citizens who did not receive expected benefits blamed NGOs. The credibility of the DG or its welfare offices were not called into question by settlement residents. Inadvertently, by putting NGOs on the frontlines, the DG protected its credibility, and reinforced the reputations of local politicians as those who could "get things done".

Politicians fought for access to welfare because it was one of the ways they could maintain control of their poor constituency as a vote bank. Good governance in the form of the Project was in danger of rendering the poor politically neutral as NGOs met their welfare needs. NGOs for their part, were not interested in creating their own power base in communities where they worked by establishing the poor as their vote bank. But local politicians' claim that they were neither accountable nor a democratic fit; politicians drew on international and national debates surrounding NGOs' role in decentralisation. First, they argued, NGOs did not care about the poor; they had no meaningful (i.e. incentivised connection) to them – their priority was to meet the DG's expectations (Townsend et al. 2002). Second, competition between NGOs for funds means they overreach their expertise in order to sustain themselves (O'Reilly 2011). Finally, NGOs offer governments cheap governance in out-of-the-way locations, including slums (Craig and Porter 2006).

We are hopeful about the possibilities for reform, but find that for internal good governance to succeed it is critical to give attention to “compensation” for those who stand to lose due to the reforms. Our analysis indicates it is further destabilising to overcompensate replacement actors. We are not arguing for the status quo, and we understand that the DG is interested in cutting the cord between the poor and politicians, but as relations of patronage go beyond welfare reform, we argue for a realistic assessment of local politicians’ power, both in their constituencies and the government itself (Edelman and Mitra 2006; Jha, Rao, and Woolcock 2007; Ghertner 2011). Our argument gives rise to the questions, “How might politicians’ power be replaced so they do not resist reform? Or is it necessary to cut them out all together?”

Drawing on Li (2005), the Project was undermined through forces the DG could not contain, but that is not to say that the poor citizens did not gain through it. Despite the challenges it faced, the DG continued the Project, albeit after major alterations. As we heard above, the poor came to know about government entitlements available to them. The DG’s material power was visible in the NGO-run Project centres where the women’s empowerment programme continued to offer free training activities and services in spaces decorated with photographs of Delhi’s chief minister and slogans of DG’s promise to “reach the unreached”. Project centres remained abuzz with activities as women gathered every day for the free tailoring and computer training. On the surface, the DG seemed to have embedded itself in the community’s physical reality.

The Project’s trajectory highlights: (1) the heterogeneity of government; (2) the difficulty of shifting traditional relations of power between elites and the urban poor; and (3) forces within the assemblage that cannot be controlled. Our research indicates that good governance can open up the possibility of coexistence between a diversity of actors and agendas, but cannot ensure its success.

## Conclusions

Countries like India are rising to the challenge of defining and implementing good governance because they understand the connection between political soundness and economic growth (Weiss 2000; Hope 2009). Hope (2009, 79–80) suggests a direct link between corruption, poor implementation of poverty alleviation projects, and the withering of foreign investments. The DG, like many urban centres in the Global South, must balance the need for the informal, cheap labour of the urban poor and the corresponding needs of capital (Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Bannerjee-Guha 2009), with the pressures from elites for their removal (Baviskar 2006; Ghertner 2011), and their undesirability by foreign investors (Mahadevia 2011). As pressure mounts, the gap in studies of internally driven good governance must be filled. This article begins to fill that gap by examining good governance as an assemblage of actors whose conflicts surpassed the ability of the implementing government to contain them. It contributes to our understanding of how the paradigm of deliberate confusion manifests in the everyday reality of the poor.

The DG recognised that good governance does not necessarily shrink its power or roll it back. In fact, the DG gathered that a decentralised governance system seeking greater transparency, accountability, citizen and NGO partnerships may further strengthen its political and bureaucratic reach (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Corbridge et al. 2005; Sharma 2006). We want to suggest that such a role for government is in keeping with the expectations of global and local actors. Good governance reforms, without radically transforming relationships between the state and citizens, may serve as positive indicators of political will for both the urban poor and foreign donors/investors.

Our ethnographic analysis found that in the absence of political will at the level of the implementing government, powerful internal actors can force a reversal of good governance reforms.

As Brinkerhoff (2003) suggests, foreign aid conditionalities exert pressure on government actors resistant to unappealing changes. The case of Project Vikaas seems to indicate that without external pressure for reforms, implementing governments cannot withstand the internal pressure to return to the status quo of service delivery. Socio-political relations between government, politicians, NGOs, and the poor are reconfigured during the process, but without a clear advantage for poor citizens.

## Epilogue

The Project assemblage continued its internal negotiations. After the events detailed above, the Project director and partner NGOs pushed for larger changes in the welfare system. Extensive surveys of unreached welfare-eligible citizens conducted by partnering NGOs were used to create a first-of-its-kind electronic welfare database. This database was created at the same time the Indian (central) government started *Adhaar*, a country-wide effort to provide each citizen with a unique identification number that will electronically connect them to all government services. The poor are expected to be directly connected to their entitled government services without any interaction or exchange with politicians, bureaucrats, and lower level government staff. Interestingly, those who constitute the material presence of the government may no longer come in direct contact with welfare-accessing citizens. The government hopes to serve its citizens by eliminating socio-political relationships between officials and citizens, while simultaneously individualising the distribution of benefits. As we have seen from the Project case study, there is likely to be a backlash.

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## Notes

- Names of all individuals, organisations and places have been replaced with pseudonyms. This includes Project Vikaas (Project Development), henceforth "Project".
- Delhi is also known as New Delhi. It is a state as well as a union territory. This paper uses the term "Delhi" to be inclusive of the new and old parts of Delhi which together constitute the capital.
- The Delhi government is the state government distinct from the central government of India, known as the Government of India, or GOI.
- These Financial Assistance Schemes (FAS) are the most popular welfare services, also known as pension schemes. They include: (1) old age pension; (2) widow pension; (3) Financial Assistance to Disabled Persons; (4) Ladli Yojna (to incentivise school education for girls); (5) Financial Assistance to Poor Widows (for performing marriage of their daughter); and (6) National Family Benefit Scheme (a one-time support of \$400 to a family whose prime breadwinner has died).
- Citizens had to approach their elected politician via middlemen to approve their request for welfare services. The politician would then either send the form directly to one of the several welfare-providing departments or have the citizen submit the form himself. A direct submission through the politician meant speedy acceptance at the department but a hefty bribe from the citizen. A submission to the department by the citizen meant long waits, insults, and bribes. Either way, the citizen suffered economically and often had to miss a day's worth of work to access welfare providers. Note that several (not all) politicians took hefty bribes through their middlemen, so did several (not all) welfare department officials.
- Poverty was redefined to include social, spatial, and occupational vulnerabilities over and above the conventional Below Poverty Line definition of US\$1.25 a day.
- Politicians and middlemen were eliminated from the process, as was any direct interaction between welfare departments and citizens. NGOs became the single point of interaction between welfare departments and the citizens.
- Direct quotations from the interview and details of the magazine are not shared to maintain anonymity of the Project and its staff.

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