Putting Research Into Practice: *Empowering Stakeholders and Finding Solutions*

PAISA Studies - An Introduction

'The flow of funds through various levels of the government is very similar to the flow of blood from the heart to the various parts of the body. If there is blockage somewhere, it affects the entire body, so in that regard PAISA studies do the work of a physician', said a senior official in the Elementary Education Department of Purnia district in Bihar.

PAISA (Planning, Allocations and Expenditures, Institutions Studies in Accountability) is Accountability Initiative's (AI) flagship research programme. The research focuses on making government process: planning, decision-making and fund flows in key social sector schemes transparent. Under the PAISA programme, AI runs the country's largest citizen-led expenditure tracking survey. These PAISA surveys are aimed at identifying implementation bottlenecks and through this understanding the factors that contribute to weak implementation and broken accountability systems on the ground.

In December, 2015, AI conducted a PAISA survey focusing on three centrally sponsored schemes (CSS) — Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and Swach Bharat Mission (SBM). The survey, conducted in 10 districts across five states (Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan) in India, was undertaken against the backdrop of significant changes in fund flows to states, with the central government enhancing tax devolution (untied money) to state governments.

Similar to PAISA surveys in the past, the 2015 survey too revealed the extent to which structural problems with the public finance management system, such as lack of transparency in fund releases, can impact the quality of programme implementation on the ground. However, the lack of predictability was exacerbated as a result of the changes in fiscal transfers. For instance, in 2015-16, 31% schools had not received their annual school grants, as compared to 5% in the previous year.

Additionally, the PAISA survey collected information on progress *in implementation*, including achievement of Right to Education related school outputs, teacher and student attendance, availability of toilets, implementation of sanitation related awareness programmes, and the prevalence of open defecation.

The survey results were disseminated at the policy level through the budget brief reports, AI's annual flagship research output. At the district level, AI adopted a new approach to dissemination. Rather than circulate reports, an attempt was made to share research findings through a dialogue with district and block level implementing officials. The objective was to leverage research findings to catalyse a groundlevel discussion on '*how to*' improve implementation and accountability — where it actually matters.

With this objective, between May, 2016 and December, 2016, a total of 40 PAISA dialogues were conducted across the 10 PAISA survey districts with sector specific implementation officials. The dialogues were conducted by AI field researchers or PAISA Associates (PA). This note captures the process of these dialogues and their impact.

PAISA Dialogues - A Platform for Finding Solutions

A land less and building less elementary government school at full attendance despite the lack of basic resources, in Purnia, Bihar

The key feature that distinguished the PAISA dialogues from the dissemination exercises of the past was that it was a 'dialogue' – focused on identifying solutions rather than a presentation of research findings. '*Whenever we conduct a dialogue to share our research, the tone and intent is not to point fingers. Rather we emphasise how this is 'our' problem rather than 'yours', and talk about how we can engage in a meaningful 'discussion to find solutions for these problems,*' said Tajuddin, Accountability Initiative's PAISA Associate in Jhunjhunu district of Rajasthan.

The feeling was mutual. '*We got a good understanding of reality through AI's research findings. Going forward, we would like to be engaged on a deeper level to make this process even more fruitful,*' expressed the SBM Coordinator in Jaipur.

Another benefit of this approach was that it developed *organically*. From the point of establishing relationships with government representatives to conducting research, sharing it, and then working together over a period of time to try and identify solutions – there was a genuine feeling of *partnership* all through. The answers were not always obvious or simple, but the entire process was oriented towards finding sustainable solutions through building strong trustful relationships.

For instance, during a PAISA Dialogue, AI's research was presented to a high-level district official in Kangra district. '*Through the dialogue we shared that despite there being a School Management Committee (SMC) in 100% of the schools sampled, the SMC members were involved in the making of the School Development Plan (SDP) in only 73% of the schools. School Development Plan is supposed to be created solely by the SMCs and is factored into the district's plans for annual fund allocations. The district officials took a lot of interest in this and asked us to contribute to the master trainers' training for all SMCs in the district. We were even asked to monitor the trainings delivered at the cluster level. We began work with five SMCs and trained them on their responsibilities as members of this committee, fiscal literacy and the mechanisms around fund flows,*' explained Indresh, a PA in Himachal Pradesh.

The Rajasthan team had a similar experience. '*For instance, SMCs previously planned the SDP around funds received through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan only, which are fully tied. However, schools can also receive money from Panchayats, the community, the MLA Lad funds etc., and since not all of these are tied funds, it gives the SMC greater freedom to develop a plan and budget for the coming year accordingly. Our training informed them about these various sources of funds, and helped them better assess, prioritise and address their needs. These mechanisms exist to provide citizens a voice in their well-being and that of their children, therefore, creating awareness around them leads to better implementation of these government schemes,*' added Tajuddin from Rajasthan.

Not only do government representatives place trust in AI's research findings and work together to find solutions, many agreed that the research mirrored their reality. '*We know a lot of these things from before but there is a level of denial within the system,*' said a District Accounts Officer from Himachal Pradesh.

Further, an ICDS official from Satara added, '*The AI presentation educated us about how funds flow from the top to the bottom. We did not receive any such training from the government. This is especially helpful to know because, a lot of times, despite irregular and uncoordinated payments to Anganwadi workers (AWW), the government expects us to run programmes without providing the funds – the money for that comes out of the pockets of AWWs a lot of times.*'

In the course of the dialogues, many officials pointed out the important role that these discussions played in validating and highlighting everyday implementation bottlenecks that

they faced. This external validation of their struggles, at times, motivated officials to push harder toward identifying solutions. Such as in the example below:

Frontline officials from the education, health and nutrition departments in Himachal Pradesh, along with local PAISA associates, presented findings of the PAISA surveys to the District Magistrate (DM) in the Himachal Pradesh survey district, which resulted in the following actions:

Finding Solutions with Education Administrators in Solan , Himachal Pradesh

- Since programmes under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme were stalled due to the lack of Anganwadi buildings for maternal and child support services, the DM ordered the completion of the buildings by June, 2016. He also asked for temporary relocation of the centres to elementary school buildings.
- There was a renewed focus on acquiring necessary equipment for height and weight measurement for monitoring and sustaining the healthy growth of women and children availing the ICDS scheme, which was earlier being neglected.

In yet another example, the PAISA survey highlighted the gaps between fund receipts and actual expenditure in schools. In the subsequent PAISA dialogues conducted, it was established that the reason for this lag was because school headmasters (who manage the school bank accounts) were not given any information on the date and time of the actual funds transfer to schools. This information was usually obtained informally during routine bank visits. '*When AI shared this with us, we started the system of sending text messages to the phones of headmasters, informing them of the transfer. This has helped us create a more open communication system and reduced the lags to an extent,*' explained an SSA official in Jhalwar district, Rajasthan.

Although change is possible, the truth is that the deep centralisation of the Indian bureaucracy leaves relatively little room for maneuver at the frontline. Consequently, the frontline bureaucracy has also drawn on the dialogues as the fora to express their grievances. '*It is often difficult for us to find a channel through which we can address our grievances. Through these interactions and sharing its research at higher levels of government, we feel AI can be our voice and a link between us and higher levels of government,*' expressed an ICDS official in Madhya Pradesh.

To that end, dialogues have been initiated and are in progress with officials at the highest levels in both districts and states, with a view to informing policy interventions, where necessary. For instance, in Rajasthan, the AI field staff presented findings from their study on the ICDS scheme to the state Director of ICDS, the Deputy Director and the Financial Advisor. They shared information on blockages of fund flows in different districts, which led to the Director and Finance Advisor ordering a deeper investigation into the matter, and finding ways to ensure effective transfers. In the words of the District Magistrate in Himachal Pradesh, '*AI's research has been very helpful. With bigger sample sizes, it can definitely be used for policy intervention to find concrete solutions.*'

PAISA Dialogue on ICDS in Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan

Why does the bottom-up approach work?

PAISA Dialogue on SSA in Purnia, Bihar

'*In most interactions between the civil society, researchers and the government, there is one crucial level—the frontline bureaucracy—which is ignored. Since these are the people responsible for the actual service delivery, we thought it was very important to reach out to them and find ways to make our research useful for them,*' said Yamini Aiyar, Director of Accountability Initiative, when asked about the strategic reason behind involving lower levels of bureaucracy in *an ongoing dialogue,* versus the typical approach of *disseminating* to high-level government officials.

This bottom-up approach has also greatly informed AI's own learning. It is evident from field interactions that those responsible for drafting policies at the state level or above are often far removed from the actual ground realities. Consequently, AI staff have begun to view their role in the social policy and governance accountability eco system differently.

'*Instead of forcing our views we are engaging in a debate from the lowest level and intend to go to the very top. This is a very productive process and I am sure will bring about the change that AI is trying to create within our government systems and schemes,*' said Ram Ratan Jat, a PA from Jaipur.

'*When you go to the bottom first then you get additional qualitative information, the ground reality, which is helpful to tie in and present along with your research. This is the sort of information which people at the state level often do not have themselves, and when we present it to them, then we, in a way, become the link between two levels of government machinery,*' explained Dinesh Kumar, a senior PA who interacts closely with state level officials in Bihar. '*For instance, when we do the PAISA dialogue, we first talk to the teacher, cluster and block officer and only then go to the district magistrate or state project director. By doing so, we take suggestions from all of these people to the higher levels of government. That along with our research has a great impact,*' he added.

From Researchers to Agents of Change

By adopting this bottom up approach towards relationship building within different levels of the government, AI made a strategic decision to make a transition from being a typical research organisation to one that uses its research to be an agent of change. This strategic move also made AI question its own structures and processes. '*If we are trying to empower the frontline of the government machinery through our research to create meaningful change, then should we not be empowering the associates within our team who are working at the field level, are aware of the cultural sensitivities, and are often more in tune with the ground realities to facilitate this change?,*' explained Yamini Aiyar.

To this end, AI has invested intensively in the development and growth of its PAs, empowering them to embody the meaning of being an 'agent of change'.

We really appreciate AI's team interacting with us on such a regular basis. Through, their research and these interactions we have learnt a lot about the ways in which funds flow through the government and have been able to identify a lot of our problems and ways in which to tackle them, even if that means knowing which questions to ask. Not a lot of organisations spend time with us in such a dedicated manner,' Supervisor at an Anganwadi Centre in Satara, Maharashtra

Mid-day meal in progress at an Anganwadi Centre in Satara, Maharashtra.

'*AI has always felt like a home. From the very beginning, they have paid attention to our skill development—from training us on government structures and fund flows, research methodologies, the softer skills pertaining to building and maintaining relationships, and now teaching us to create and tell stories from the research we help conduct. We are a part of this process from the beginning to the end. It is a lot of responsibility but it is also very empowering,*' said Poonam, a senior PA in the Rajasthan state team. Poonam started out at AI in 2009 very close to its inception. Beginning with district and block level engagements, Poonam is now also involved with state level engagements and in mentoring younger PAs in the state team.

Swapna, a senior PA in Madhya Pradesh, reflects similar sentiments. '*When I started working at AI, I felt hesitant even going up to a district official, let alone discussing matters related to accountability*

and governance,' she said. However, recently Swapna presented AI's research findings at a meeting of the highest ranking district officials convened by the District Magistrate. There was no hesitation and she felt completely at ease discussing complex themes relating to accountability and governance with those responsible for ensuring it. They sat there in silence and paid attention to everything she had to say. '*I feel I am now confident and aware enough to conduct these disseminations at the state level as well,*' she added with a smile.

Tajuddin explained how working with AI honed his communication skills greatly, '*The biggest learning for me has been to know how to translate data into a story and more importantly how to mould it in different ways for different stakeholders. For instance, powerpoint presentations and charts with percentages are great at the district level, but if we are presenting to a member of a SMC who is illiterate, we need to get creative in terms of our presentation. So we presented our findings on posters through pictures. The training given at AI and our comfort with the material we are presenting has given us the confidence and comfort of customising our presentation style.*'

And finally Ram Ratan Jat summed up what drives all the Associates who are deeply committed to AI, '*I really relate to AI's mission, vision and objectives. It is one of those rare organisations which constantly gives you opportunities to grow, if you are willing to. I have spent more than six years of my life here and I have not felt that the learning stopped at any point during this long period of time.*'

The Accountability Initiative Team with the PAISA Associates.

Data collected by Naman Govil.