

Why Data-Driven Decisions Matter in Rural Development?

Sujata Tripathy, State Lead West Bengal, Water For People

Introduction

Working in the rural development sector for the past several years, and more closely with government departments over the last two, one thing has become increasingly evident: the gap between reported data and ground realities is often vast. While official dashboards and reports may reflect impressive progress, the situation on the ground can tell a very different story. This disconnect raises critical questions about the accuracy, reliability, and use of data in decision-making processes. Also, it is important to ensure resources are used effectively and efficiently in the development process.

The Problem with Data Discrepancies: In many rural development programs, data flows hierarchically—from panchayat to block, from block to district, and then to the state or national level. However, this structure is often prone to data discrepancies. The numbers reported are frequently based on claims rather than verified facts. Field visits and close monitoring often reveal mismatches between what is reported and what actually exists in communities. For example, service delivery data may indicate 100% coverage of certain amenities, yet on the ground, communities still lack access to clean water, proper sanitation, or functioning health services. This undermines not just the credibility of the data but the entire developmental agenda, leading to inefficiencies, wasted resources, and community disillusionment.

The Illusion of Progress: Dashboards often show a smooth upward trajectory, with key performance indicators (KPIs) suggesting consistent progress. But these figures can be misleading. Many a time, all the structural elements appear to be in place—schemes are launched, service providers are appointed, and funds are allocated. Yet, the accountability mechanism—*who does what and how effectively*—remains unclear. The lack of clarity in roles and incentives for frontline workers, along with limited checks and balances, affects the quality of services delivered. Without proper monitoring and data validation, it's difficult to assess whether services are truly reaching the people they are intended for.

Why Real-Time Data Matters: In such a scenario, the importance of **real-time, evidence-based data** becomes paramount. Real-time data allows for immediate visibility into the progress and performance of service providers on the ground. It highlights not just the numbers but also the qualitative aspects of development—challenges faced, gaps in implementation, and areas needing intervention. When real-time data is linked to payment disbursements or performance evaluations, it builds accountability. Service providers become more committed to delivering quality work, knowing that their efforts are being tracked and evaluated in real time.

The Power of Integration and Convergence: Another critical aspect that hampers rural development is the lack of convergence between departments. Each department often operates in silos, leading to duplication of efforts and missed opportunities for resource optimization. A unified data platform, accessible by all relevant departments, can act as a bridge. It can help link interrelated schemes and resources, identify overlaps, and create synergies that drive transformative change. When trained and skilled personnel are tracked and their performance is recorded, they can be leveraged across departments for more effective service delivery.

A Case: Participatory Digital Attestation Platform: Water For People piloted an innovative tool called the **Participatory Digital Attestation (PDA) with Socion**. Offered as a Software-as-a-Service (SaaS), this platform is designed to digitally enable large-scale development initiatives by capturing real-time data, tracking community engagement, and monitoring program performance. PDA was effectively used as a pilot during the Village Action Plan (VAP) exercise under the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) at Birbhum district, involving grassroots actors like Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Village Resource Persons (VRPs). The platform allowed for real-time data collection and validation. When analysed, it revealed that 40–50% of previously reported data in few metrics did not match ground realities. This startling insight prompted district officials to reassess and revise strategies, supporting towards more targeted and effective interventions.

Challenges in Adoption: While the advantages of real-time, data-driven decision-making are clear, its adoption is not without challenges. One significant concern is that evidence-based data can sometimes conflict with previously reported figures, leading to internal resistance. Drastic shifts in reported outcomes can appear as discrepancies or failures, even when they are actually corrections of earlier inaccuracies. However, it is important to see this not as a setback, but as a necessary step toward **transparency and course correction**. Data that reveals the truth enables better planning, resource allocation, and service delivery. It allows decision-makers to be proactive rather than reactive, and strategic rather than ad hoc.

Toward a Culture of Accountability and Impact: For rural development to be truly impactful, data must serve as more than just a reporting tool. It should be the backbone of strategy, planning, execution, and evaluation. This means investing in digital tools, training grassroots workers in data collection and validation, and fostering a culture where **accuracy and accountability are prioritized over superficial progress**. Moreover, data is not only quantitative but qualitative insights—gathered through community feedback, focus group discussions, and real-time monitoring—are equally valuable. They offer a more holistic view of progress and help tailor interventions to local needs. identify real needs, set priorities, and measure the impact of initiatives.

Rural development cannot rely solely on top-down data flows and aggregated statistics. It needs **real-time, reliable, and actionable data** that reflects the lived realities of rural communities. When decision-makers are equipped with accurate insights, they can design and implement interventions that are not just efficient but also equitable and sustainable.

As we continue to work closely with governments and communities, the path forward is clear: **data-driven decisions are not optional—they are essential.** The sooner we integrate real-time data platforms, enforce accountability mechanisms, and break departmental silos, the closer we will get to achieving genuine, ground-level progress in rural India.



water for people