What is Agency?

Literature and interviews suggest that agency is the 'capacity of an individual to act independently and to make free choices'

Agency is inherent to everyone

- In theory, everybody in all contexts has a choice they can make over decisions in their life, but their ability to enact this choice is controlled by internal and external factors.
- In the context of governance, people enact agency by seeking services to which they are entitled.
- People may experience agency breakdowns in navigating constraints while seeking services from the State

However, the ability to enact agency is limited by the sociopolitical contexts, and external and internal constraints

- Barriers to agency in the context of governance may be due to limited access, bureaucratic processes, loss of rights, and loss of trust

This study:
- maps agency breakdowns
- Surfaces design principles for its restoration

Overview of breakdowns

1 Breakdown of trust due to:
- past experiences
- perceptions of institutions
- lack of visibility
- lack of ownership over

2 Breakdown of Access due to:
- Lack of information
- Lack of knowledge
- Lack of capacity to engage
- Lack of choices
- Lack of infrastructure

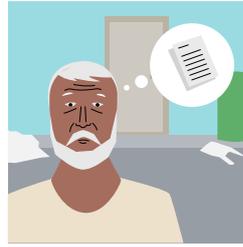**3 Breakdown at the institutional level due to:**
- bureaucracy
- constraints of employment
- chain of command

4 Breakdown at loss of rights due to:
- socio-structural barriers
- lack of representation
- lack of leadership
- lack of entitlement

1 Breakdown of agency due to lack of access: Ramesh's Story

Agency loss due to breakdown of access to: information, knowledge, capacity to engage, and usage.

Ramesh lives in an informal neighbourhood where he cannot prove his legal right over the land on which he lives.

He does not feel inclined to approach the municipality in person to place a complaint over poor sanitation.

He could have borrowed his daughter's smartphone to place a complaint through the web portal or call the IVRS number, but he does not know that such a service exists

2 Breakdown of agency due to institutional barriers: Shantha's story

Agency loss due to breakdown at the institutional level caused by bureaucracy, employment constraints, and chain of command

Shantha needs to place a complaint about a delay in obtaining her ration card, she prefers to submit it in person at the municipal office.

The frontline official asks her to return the next day as the official responsible to address her complaint is unavailable today.

Shantha cannot afford to return the next day because she is a daily wage earner, and each day lost is a loss in wage.

3 Breakdown of agency due to loss of rights: Rubaina's Story

Agency loss due to loss of rights caused by socio-structural barriers, lack of representation, lack of leadership, and lack of entitlement.

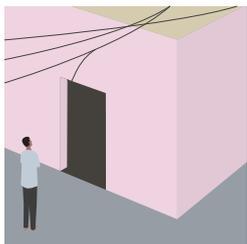Rubaina is a wage worker and migrant from Bihar currently working in Bangalore.

She requires an ID card for her daughter's schooling. She does not have local networks in Bangalore through which she can get the ID card done.

When she visits the municipal office, she is refused an ID card as she is suspected to be an illegal migrant worker

4 Breakdown of agency due to loss of trust: Selva's Story

Agency loss due to breakdown of trust due to past experiences, perceptions of institutions, lack of visibility or transparency, and lack of ownership over processes

Selva lives in an informal settlement in an affluent part of town.

His electricity connection is often faulty, and he knows the number of the local municipal official that he can call to get it fixed. However, he refuses to do so as he has previously had to pay bribes.

So, he prefers to ignore the issue, or fix it himself at the risk of danger.

Overview of potential design principles to restore agency

1

Increasing access:
- Building awareness around alternate pathways to reach the State
- Inclusive conversation with key stakeholders on the ground

2

Decreasing bureaucratic bottlenecks:
- Address capacity gaps that arise from bureaucratic style of functioning
- Automated backchecks to ensure accountability

3

Increasing rights awareness:
- Amplify rights knowledge through technology
- Leverage community level networks to decentralise information dissemination on rights, and pathways to access them

4

Building trust in systems:
- Partner with local networks to build reputation through already trusted linkages
- Ensure accountability by strengthening existing processes to reach the state

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