

Societal Dialogues: Restoring Agency

Societal Platform and eGovernments Foundation

Aapti institute



Index

1. Agency – Project Introduction
2. Findings
3. Discussion of design principles

Conversations with Societal Platform highlighted the need to explore the notion of agency and its restoration

Why do we need to study agency?

- This study engages with the notion of agency in three significant ways—*understanding its meaning, locating its loss, and thinking towards its restoration.*
- *Restoring agency is a core value of Societal Platforms*
- *Without agency, platforms risk losing trust with their end-users, and undermining the very social aims they set out with.*

Restoring agency is a central goal of the Societal Platform Thinking

- Loss of agency due to socio-economic circumstances
 - power and political economies
 - Structural barriers to citizenship
-
- How do we think about agency and restoring it?
 - What are the measurable, trackable, and actionable ways to restore agency?

What are the design features of restoring agency?

We ask what are the design features of platforms that can restore agency and sub-questions under that

What are the design features of restoring agency?

How can we build on what we know to refine an understanding of agency?

What are the barriers and enablers of exercising/restoring agency?

How can we learn from mission experiences and experts to operationalize agency restoration?

How can we learn from expert experiences to build a trackable, actionable, fixable definition of agency?

Partnership with eGovernments Foundation:

The ecosystem within which this study is embedded is centred around the eGovernments Foundation and their governance solutions adopted by various State governments (Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu) to enable State service delivery through technology.

We explored the notion of agency – it is made of ability, choice and control, each individually inadequate

Agency is the 'capacity of an individual to act independently and to make free choices'

Operationalizing through any one approach is unsatisfactory as it ignores:

Ability

Focused on individual ability to make the choice - includes the instrumental ability (phone, data) and capacity (digital literacy)

Preceding social context (eg caste, gender)

Choice

Embedded in the notion of individual choice and having an adequate set of options

External constraints outside of individual ability

Control

Control over outcomes, decisions, and processes

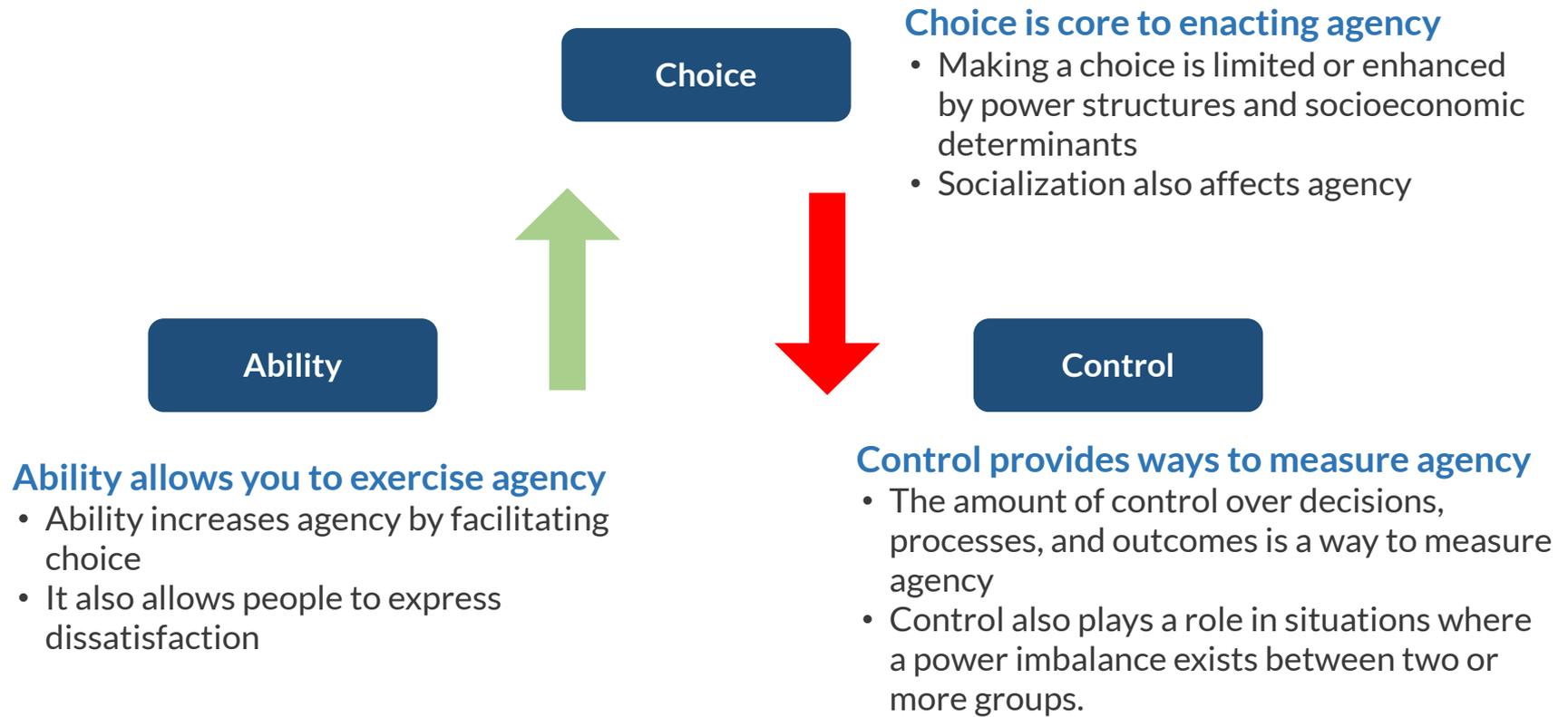
Idiosyncratic concerns or preferences

Imperative to adopt a 'Modified Choice Approach'

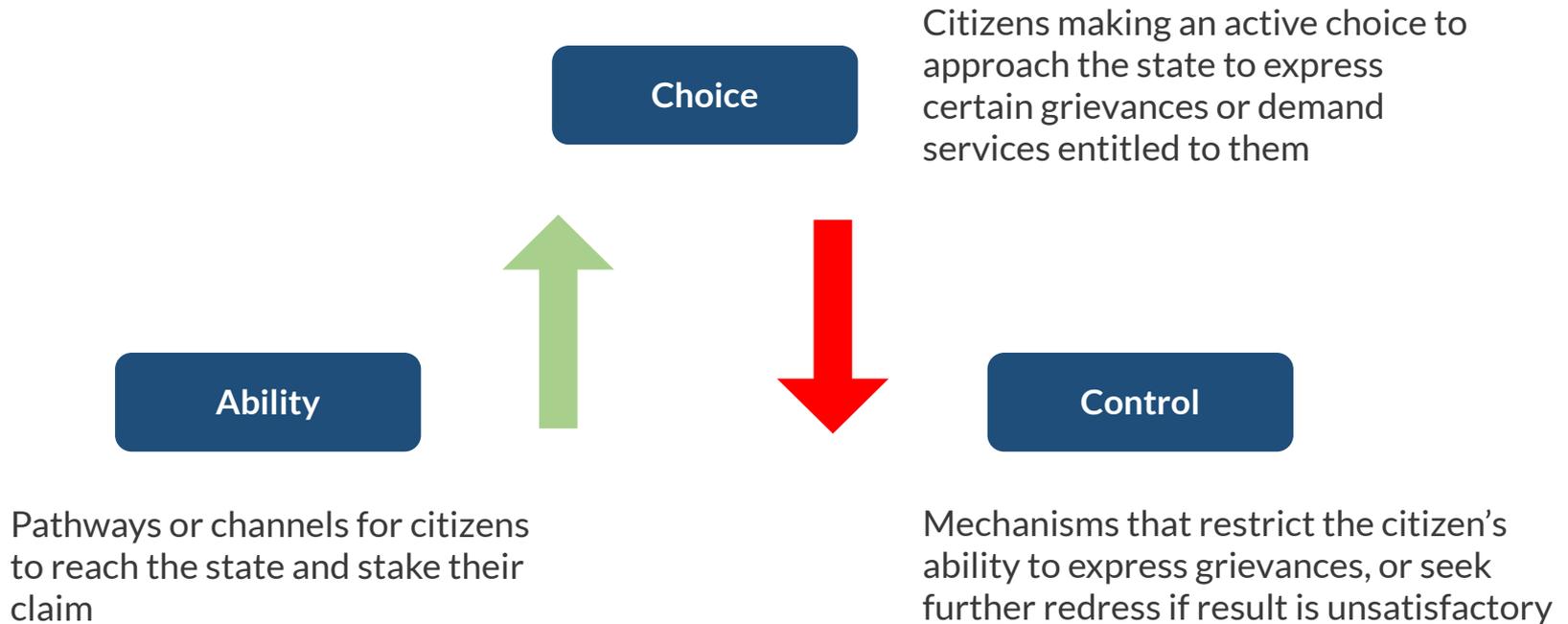
At a conceptual level, a modified choice approach is best to understand agency

Solution: A modified choice approach

Agency as ultimately enabling choice, constrained by control (or manoeuvring power structures) and restored by unlocking ability (instruments and capacity)



We use the modified choice approach in the context of urban service delivery and public grievance redressal



Using the modified choice approach, we are able to surface 'Design How-To's to address agency breakdowns.

We find that digital solutions can amplify agency, but restoration lies in the social realm

A
g
e
n
c
y

Agency emerges from the rights discourse, it is habitual and offline:

- Individuals entitled to State services
- Individuals must be socialised to use agency and demand services.
- Socialisation occurs offline

*“Agency is restored through habituating choice and decision making”**

Technology is not a panacea for agency restoration:

- Technological amplifies and scales agency restoration, restoration itself occurs offline
- Caveat: when technology is deployed in a context of agency loss, the divide may

*“Once agency is restored offline, people are empowered to enact choices; technology helps amplify enactment”**

Technology is an enabling infrastructure for amplifying agency restoration

To move towards action, we explore barriers to agency, lived experiences of enacting it and surface design principles

We consider the WhatsApp solution design in the context of Punjab as an example of agency in action*

Barrier

In Punjab, the barrier to the use of digital solutions is due to

- Lack of awareness
- Inability to navigate solution
- Friction of installing new app.

(Aapti-ONI study)

Enacted agency

Given the barriers to access, both citizens and ward officials adopt alternate channels such as WhatsApp

Design principle

By understanding that the citizens and ward officials have used their agency to enact choices like WhatsApp, eGov incorporates it as a plugin

Fieldwork may help us to:

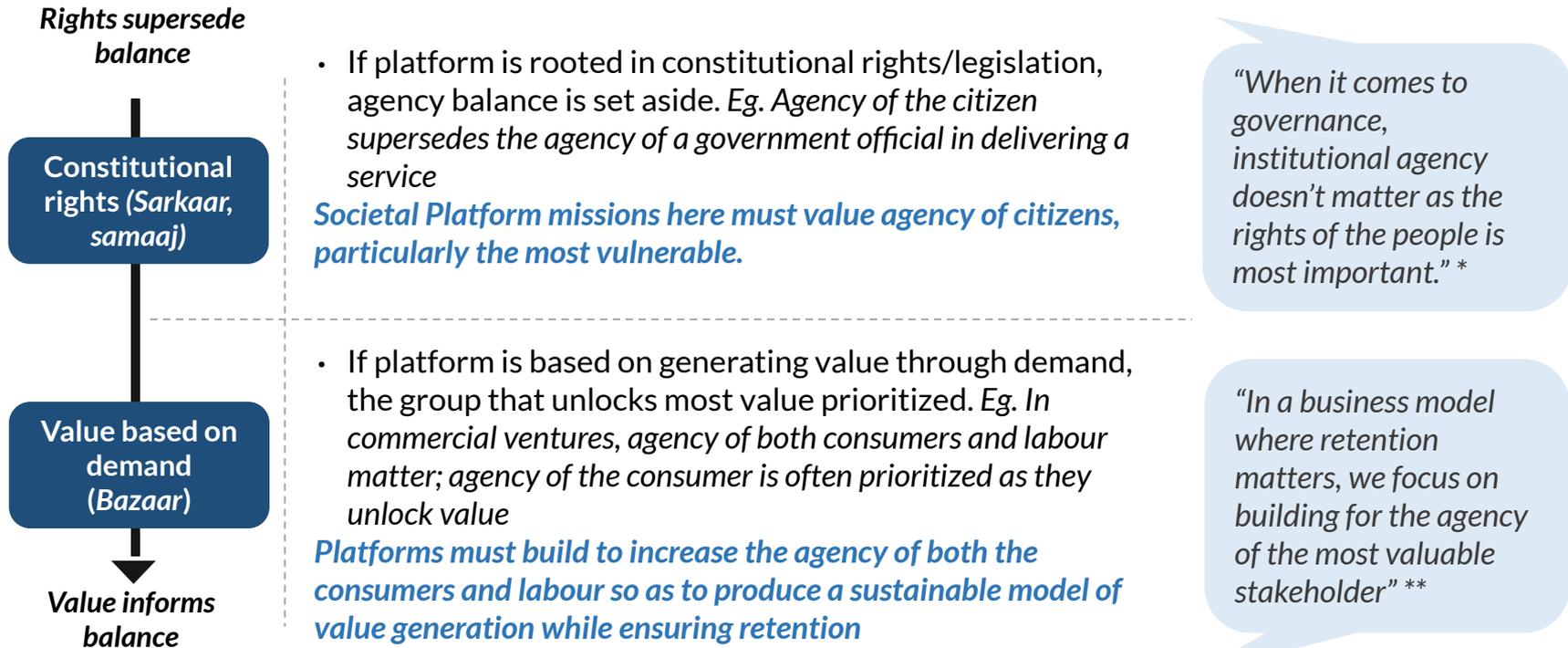
- Find points of breakdown of agency experienced by users
- Provide similar examples of solution design informed by end-users
- Utilise the format above to describe similar examples of enacting agency

* From citizen interviews, last mile community interviews, conversations with eGov

Agenda

1. Agency – Project Introduction
2. Findings
3. Discussion of design principles

1. Agency is enacted through interaction of individuals, groups and institutions



Design principles strive for the balance of agency between all stakeholders, the context informs prioritization.

2. While agency is individual, restoration lies in the community

“For a systemic change, we cannot think of improving individual agency because social change doesn’t rest with an individual, it has to be about increasing collective agency.” – Prof. Roberts



- Certain groups historically had limits to their agency
- Caste and class affect agency
- Such groups have self-organised and built mechanisms for collective agency
- Each individual benefits from representation of the group
- Individual agency restored through collective agency



- Tech offers each individual the infrastructural capacity to enact their agency
- But, choice to do so depends on agency restoration that happens at the collective level.

For robust understanding of individual agency in action, further field research is essential

Agenda

1. Agency – Project Introduction
2. Findings
3. Discussion of design principles

3. Agency broken along 4 key dimensions – lack of access, institution structure and process, loss of rights, fraying of trust

This nexus of points of agency breakdown informs design principles to be tested on the ground

1. Breakdown of Access

- To information
- To knowledge
- To usage
- To choices
- To infrastructure

Cause: Absence of information dissemination channels, low digital literacy, low resources

2. Breakdown at the institutional level due to:

- Due to bureaucracy
- Due to employment constraints
- Due to chain of command

Cause: lack of flexibility at work, and unscrupulous officials,

Agency

3. Breakdown at loss of rights due to:

- Due to socio-structural barriers
- Due to lack of representation
- Due to lack of leadership
- Due to lack of entitlement

Cause: historical oppression, and lack of opportunities

4. Breakdown of trust due to:

- Due to perceptions of institutions
- Due to lack of visibility
- Due to lack of ownership over processes

Cause: Due to non responsiveness, rent seeking, and past experiences

Overview of potential design principles to restore agency

Restore agency for breakdowns by:

**D
e
s
i
g
n

H
o
w

T
o**

1. Establish pathways of access to information, capital, and infrastructure

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

2. Build accountability in process

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

3. Design and index for rights/legal framework

- Amplify rights knowledge through technology
- Leverage community level networks to decentralize information dissemination on rights, and pathways to access them

4. Find ways to enhance trust

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

On increasing accessible pathways to increase agency

Barriers that exist:

- To information about solutions, rights, pathways to the state
- Few choice of pathways to reach the state
- No accessible interface that is easy to navigate



Agency in action:

- Relying on intermediaries to gain information, and as a pathway to reach the state
- Utilizing low-tech pathways
- Actively seeking information by collectivizing

Discussion themes:

1. How do we address the information asymmetry between citizens and the State, especially for vulnerable populations?
2. Is access a sufficient condition for citizens to enact their agency?
3. What are the ways to habituate claim-making for historically disenfranchised groups?

How do we adopt the following design Input:

- Have inclusive conversations with all actors at the table
- Do this at the three stages of design, deployment and post deployment impact analysis

On decreasing institutional bottlenecks and bureaucracy

Barriers that exist:

- Employment constraints for daily wagers
- Bureaucracy style of functioning deters interaction between citizens and state



Agency in action:

- Citizens pay intermediate agents to solve issues on their behalf
- Motivated officials may go out of their way to solve issues

Discussion themes:

1. How can the wider ecosystem (civil society, platform thinkers etc) engage with the State to drive agency?
2. How intractable is the bureaucratic way of functioning?
3. Can technology address this or must change first happen offline?

How do we adopt the following design Input:

- Need for remedial conversations with governance level implementers to address bottlenecks at the implementation level.

On indexing for constitutional rights and diminish discrimination

Barriers that exist:

- Structural breakdowns for caste and religious minorities limit agency to reach the state
- Lack of trust in the state due to past experiences



Agency in action:

- Form identity based associations to mediate with the states for services
- Peer to peer information dissemination to increase rights knowledge

Discussion themes:

1. Can decentralization play a role in increasing agency at all socioeconomic levels? (ex: COVID response)
2. Can technology be used as a tool to increase representation of vulnerable groups in engaging with the State?

How do we adopt the following design Input:

Technologists connect with identity based associations to amplify issues they face rather than muting their identity.

On designing for trust and transparency

Barriers that exist:

- Mistrust in the state due to delay in action
- Mistrust due to illicit practices like seeking bribes



Agency in action:

- Obtain services through trusted non-state channels
- Choose not to address the issue

Discussion themes:

1. How do we ensure for sustained visibility and transparency of state processes?

How do we adopt the following design Input:

Need to leverage existing trust networks in marginalized communities to build trust-based associations with a given solution; build tighter feedback loops to ensure state visibility.

Resource Library

1. Karl Marx: The Structure-Agency Problem.
2. Blank, Grant, and Mark Graham. “Local Geographies of Digital Inequality.”
3. Slack, J. D., & Wise, J. M., (2007). “Agency” In Culture and technology: A primer.
4. Digital Access is not Binary: The 5'A's of Technology Access in the Philippines Tony Roberts Kevin Hernandez
5. Smart, Barry. “Foucault, Sociology, and the Problem of Human Agency.”
6. The architecture of digital labour platforms: Policy recommendations on platform design for worker well-being Sangeet Paul Choudary
7. Barker, Chris. 2005. Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice
8. Sen A. Development as Capability Expansion. In: Fukuda-Parr S, et al Readings in Human Development.
9. Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan

