Foundation for Responsive Governance

ISSUE BRIEF

Visualising Governance: A Comprehensive Approach to Representing Government Structures and Processes

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1. Challenge of understanding the state

The role of development practitioners (especially private actors) supporting governments has increased in the last two decades (Marmot 2023). Development practitioners support the government in a variety of roles from programme implementation to research and advisory support (Aiyar 2022). In some cases, they finance development programmes as well.

A robust understanding of the state is the cornerstone of any development practitioner's intervention toolkit. We have observed an unrecognised information asymmetry among development practitioners on the state's complex structure at different tiers. Without understanding how the state is structured and how it functions, development practitioners struggle to identify how to approach the state or facilitate others in doing so.

Part of the problem is that information is rarely disclosed by the state proactively (Mandowara and Thomas 2023). Information on government websites, often, remain out-of-date and devoid of recent developments (Sharma 2018). Sourcing information offline involves visiting government offices and requesting information in person. This comes with its own myriad challenges, such as outright request rejections or identifying the right functionary with the information – one that involves running pillar to post.

CHALLENGES OF UNDERSTANDING THE STATE

- Information is rarely disclosed by the states
- Available information is out-of-date and devoid of recent developments
- Organisations spend resources collecting the data but this remains tacit and tied to individuals

Consequently, development practitioners often spend enormous amounts of time gathering information. Acquiring knowledge, however, is just the first step. Struggles also exist on how to retain this knowledge as it remains tacit and tied to individuals who collect the information firsthand. With attrition, this information is lost almost immediately (Matturi 2016). The lack of internal knowledge management systems where this information can be codified only makes this challenge worse.

To solve this challenge of understanding the complex functioning of the state, at the Foundation for Responsive Governance we design visual and interactive methods to map the state in the form of organograms. While organograms depicting department structures are not uncommon, they lack information on everyday nuances such as the roles and responsibilities of functionaries, how they work together, and the challenges that arise in the process. Our years of experience working with the state have made us realise that understanding these nuances are crucial to decipher the complexity of the state and tailor how we approach and work with the state. To capture these nuances, we codify tacit knowledge accumulated over a decade of development research to break down the state's organisation structure from the highest level down to the last mile. We incorporate thematic information such as the decentralisation of the state and the functioning of policy integration to create learning tools in the form of maps. In this practice note, we aim to unpack what these maps capture and how we create these maps. We share a five-step proposition that can support development practitioners in creating maps and provide a use case of how these maps are actionable for development practitioners.

2. Constructing maps to visualise the state

We use a visual, dynamic, interactive method to understand the state. In this, we look at five different thematic areas to create nuanced maps:

Composition of the state and their responsibilities

Understanding the composition of the state is foundational information that enables a comprehensive lay of the land. We understand the functionaries and their roles by collecting information on the functions they perform. The information includes the tier of governance they belong to, the functions they perform regularly and irregularly, and the functionaries they report to.

Complexities of state interactions

On connecting information on whom each functionary interacts with or reports to, we identified that multiple types of relationships affect how roles and responsibilities are performed. For example, a functionary may regularly take orders from an immediate supervisor in the same department and yet may have to report to another if there is a joint scheme. We identified ten complex reporting and coordination relationships (see table 1 below) that depict how hierarchies of routine functioning, policy integration, and decentralisation are often practised based on India's governance structures and legislations.

A complex organogram that incorporates these ten types of reporting and coordination gives a more accurate, functional, and operationally relevant picture of how governance truly works in India. For example, differentiating between skip-level reporting, direct reporting, and coordination for convergence reporting style helps capture the functional pathways through which policies are implemented. It helps one identify soft power dynamics, informal influence channels, and sources of potential bottlenecks and acknowledge accountability loops beyond command structures.

Flow of public monies

Understanding the flow of public monies enables designing efficient interventions where it matters (both within and outside the state). By following schemes guidelines and documents that ensure financial probity, we track each functionary through whom a single penny flows. Coupling this information with the functionary's responsibilities enables a well-rounded understanding of whether they authorise, monitor, or merely channel public money to the last mile. On constructing this map, multiple fund flow channels emerge for different public money sources.

Interactions of the state with citizens and non-state actors

Tracking the avenues through which citizens can engage with the state allows unpacking the specific ways in which the engagement takes place, rooted in reality. Partnerships with non-state actors enable understanding of other avenues where responsibilities are shared.

Complexities of state functioning

On mapping the above factors, we recognise the need to analyse and define the complications that arise when the state does not meet its objectives. These include the effects of lack of necessary human resources and capacity building or poor allocation and expenditure of public funds.

Table 1: Types of reporting and coordination for the mapping method

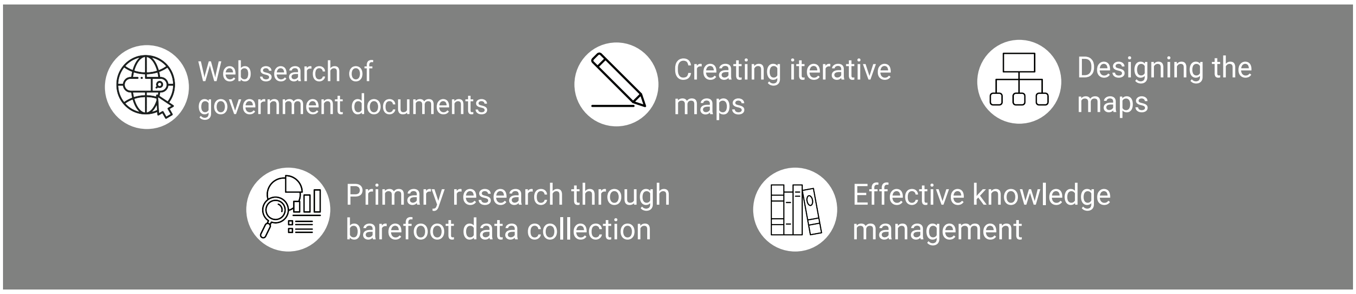
Type of reporting	Brief description
Direct reporting	Reporting between a bureaucrat and their immediate superior in the same department
Skip level reporting	Reporting between a bureaucrat and a superior in one administrative level above their immediate superior
Reporting across departments	Reporting between bureaucrats across two departments that involves sharing routine responsibilities
Coordination for convergence	Reporting between bureaucrats across two departments that involves sharing responsibilities specifically for converged work
Reporting between elected representative and bureaucratic counterpart	Reporting between an elected representative and a bureaucrat responsible for a specific set of welfare functions
Reporting from department to administration	Reporting between a line department (such as education and health) and general administration responsible for an administrative tier
Reporting to track funds	Reporting between functionaries to track the flow of public funds from their disbursal till they are received
Coordination for social accountability	Engagement between citizens and the state through formal avenues for social accountability such as Jan Sabhas or committees where both share responsibilities
Coordination between government to development practitioners	Engagement between government functionaries and development practitioners that have partnered with the state to support welfare services
Special Reporting	Highlighting context-specific differences based on the state's legislation

The following section explores how development practitioners can build their own maps with a focus on the sources and processes of storing information and pedagogy applied to design the interactive course.

3. Propositions to build the maps

This section explores five core aspects (see figure 1 below) of how to design the maps.

Figure 1: Five propositions to building the maps



3.1 Web search of government documents

As the team begins its research to build the maps, a web search can be used to identify the federal and state schemes through which the welfare service is being delivered. Post identification, scheme guidelines can be used to understand 1) the various activities involved in delivering the scheme, 2) the core departments involved and the integration between them. Once the core departments have been identified, the next step entails mapping the key functionaries within each department involved in service delivery. Government websites, job postings, and scheme guidelines can be valuable sources for this information. In addition to this, job charts that explain the roles and responsibilities of each functionary proves useful in identifying their specific tasks.

While conducting secondary research, it is also essential to track administrative documents like scheme updates, circulars, orders, and meeting notes to track on-ground changes made to scheme implementation, creation or abolishment of posts, and changes in responsibilities of functionaries. Budget documents of different ministries involved in the sector can be used to understand how funds for different schemes and regular functioning within the sector flow. Secondary resources can be used to understand each stakeholder involved with tracking, disbursing, planning, or spending the funds.

3.2 Primary research through barefoot data collection

The maps capture a balance between the normative structures of government and the realities on the ground. Often there is a gap between the normative forms of governance highlighted in legislations, rules, and scheme guidelines and how they are implemented. Therefore, it becomes important to use barefoot data collection methods in the field to source primary information at different government offices.

When building the method, we observed a lack of clarity on the roles and responsibilities and the administrative processes that are followed by the mid-level and frontline bureaucrats in India. The lack of clarity may be due to structures that are constantly modified at different levels of the federal government structure. This leads to ad hoc functions performed by the bureaucrats based on the circulars and orders received from their superiors. Reporting and coordination styles inter and intra-department can also vary depending on the context. As a result, most of the knowledge gained by functionaries about their roles and executing administrative processes remains in the form of tacit knowledge gained over time with experience. Using barefoot data collection to conduct interviews with functionaries to document this tacit knowledge proves useful here.

An example of a challenge we encountered when building a map for school education in Bihar was that of what “Project Officers” do at the block level. Project Officers at the block level were deployed for various education “projects” launched by the state who continued to work after project closure. Post project closure, they had been assigned new responsibilities that we could not find in scheme documents. Eventually, a deep dive into government orders provided the much-needed proof of what we had observed, thus solving our confusion. This effort took multiple block and state-level visits to solve.

3.3 Creating iterative maps

Once sufficient data through primary and secondary research has been collected, the next step is to create a draft map. Through the process of collating information from different sources, one must be able to:

Visualise the composition of the state

This involves identifying the key departments and the functionaries within each department involved in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of the various schemes for the welfare service. Showing every functionary can be overwhelming in the early stages for the user hence it's best to show those that play a critical role and have public-facing roles. Once the functionaries have been identified it is also important to visualise the administrative level (state, district, block, cluster or city/village level) at which each functionary works as well as which functionaries (inter and intra department) work at the same level of hierarchy.

The next step involves breaking down the various activities involved in the service delivery process and linking them to the roles and responsibilities of each functionary.

Map complexities of state interactions

This involves categorising the different forms in which functionaries report to or coordinate with each other and depicting it visually.

Depict flow of public monies

For depicting the flow, members should have clarity on the different forms in which fund flows from the state to the lowest administrative level as well as the functionaries involved in the process.

Visualising the collected information involves rigorous critical thinking as each team member tries to understand the links between information, identify inconsistencies and errors in statements, claims or information gathered, and reflect on their assumptions and biases. Once each member has constructed a draft map, the team can compare their maps to identify the difference in perspective and the emerging gaps and questions, which can be answered through additional primary and secondary research. The figures 2 and 3 below depict how these maps could change from initial deliberation to a final designed version. Dialoguing with team members is important as it enables identifying relevant sources and depth of information the team wants to depict on their maps. Building the maps is an iterative process, and they evolve as new information and feedback emerge.

Figure 2: A hand-drawn map (in Hindi) by a Field Associate

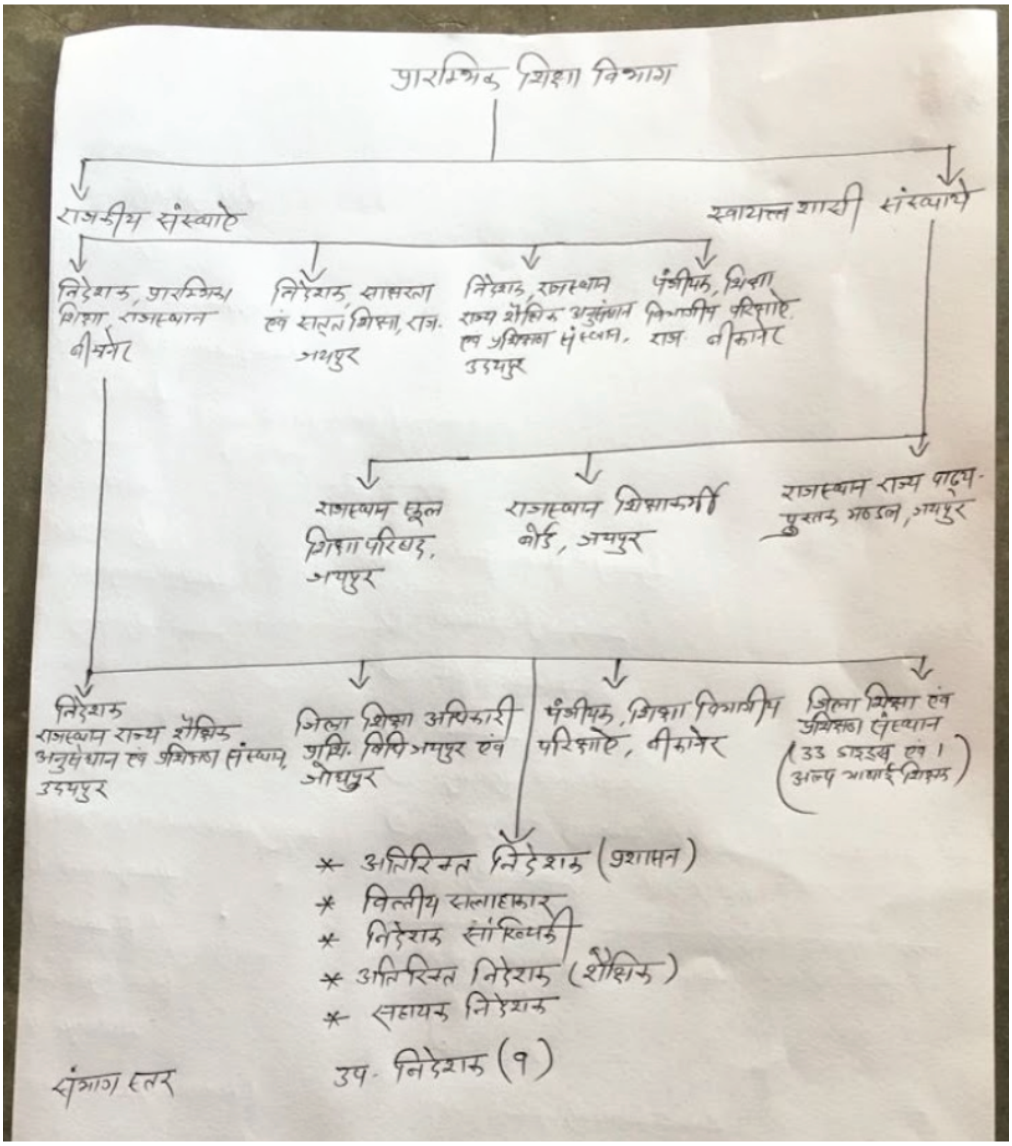
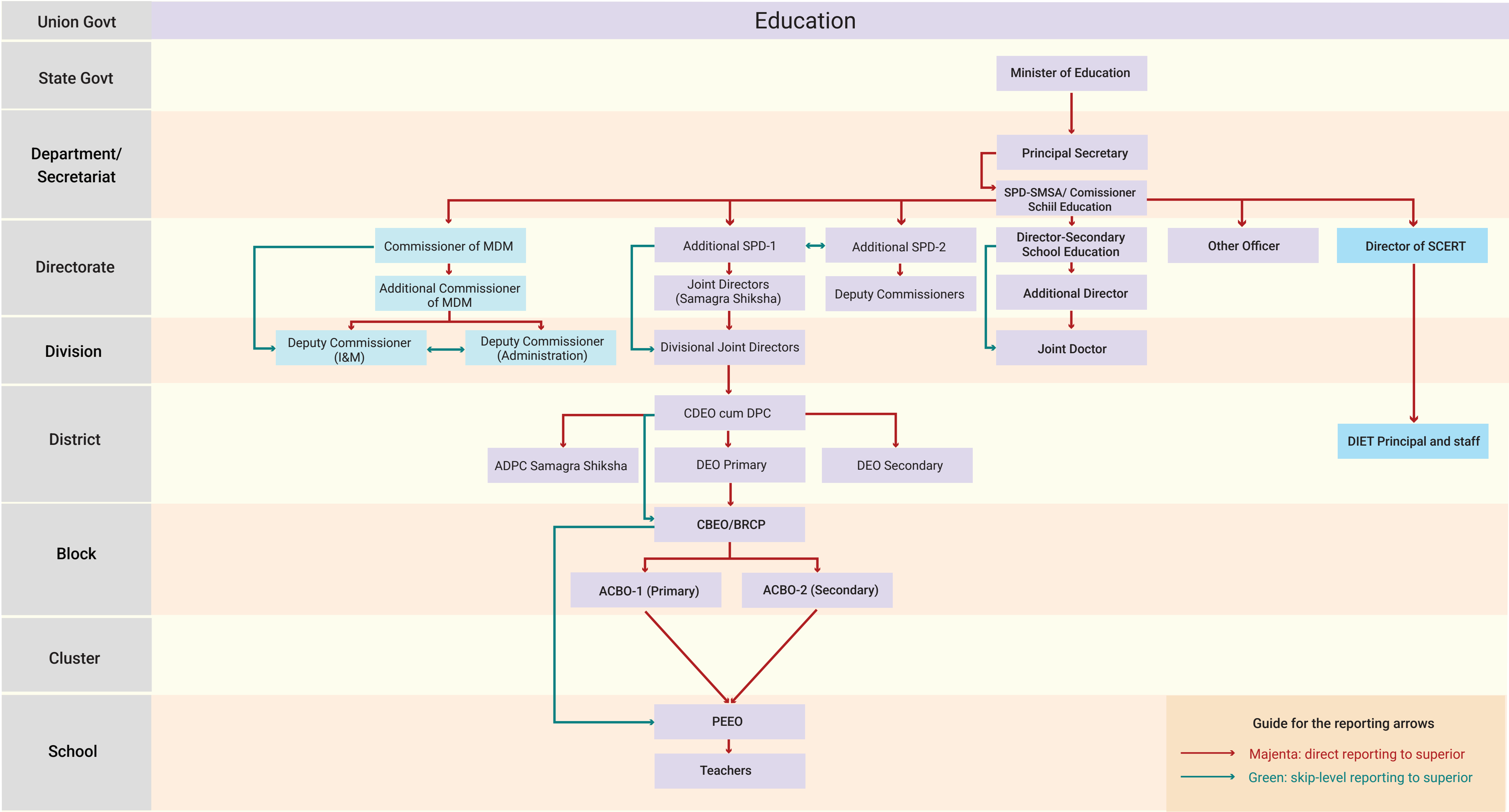


Figure 3: A map after it was deliberated and designed on a software platform



3.4 Effective knowledge management

As one collects primary and secondary research and creates rounds of iterative maps, having structures to manage this knowledge is essential. Effective knowledge management is vital to ensure that information is accessible to all the team members constructing the maps. It also enables a smooth knowledge transfer to other team members for future maps.

To achieve effective knowledge management, first, the team needs to create methodical systems to collect the information. Information collected must be recorded and documented during the project so that all data on the final map has trusted sources. Often, information on government websites is taken down, making it essential to store data when accessed. Properly classifying and systematically processing collected sources can also help break down and analyse their interlinkages.

Second, it is important that the knowledge gained through the project is distributed after project completion across divisions involved in similar projects in the future. This ensures that lessons learned from past projects are provided to the project team. This prevents the team from reaching a stage of "project amnesia" defined as "not retaining project insights" and integrating them systematically into the organisational knowledge base by Schindler & Eppler (2003, p.219).

Further, all the iterative maps should also be documented to understand the evolution of the map over the period of the project.

3.5 Designing the map

When building a map, the focus should not only be on the information being conveyed but on how that information is being conveyed visually. In order to make sense of the information on the map, the reader will simultaneously engage in multiple complex activities.

This can be a powerful internal tool for organisations working with the state. Such maps help teams understand the actual operational landscape: who holds decision-making power, how responsibilities are distributed, and where convergence or breakdowns in communication are likely to occur. Internally, they support stakeholder engagement planning, risk assessment, and the design of interventions that align with existing state structures. They also help contextualise strategies across different states, especially where legislation or administrative arrangements vary.

For new team members, these maps are equally valuable as they offer a quick orientation to the governance system, illustrate real-world implementation complexities, and build practical understanding of the field-level challenges that frontline functionaries and elected representatives face. As training tools, they enable systems thinking, improve inter-vertical collaboration within the organisation, and prepare new members to engage more effectively with government counterparts. In short, these maps can be used as a tool to transform abstract hierarchies into actionable understanding, strengthening both strategy and team capacity.

Since these maps can serve as powerful orientation tools, one must be careful in how they are designed. The map should guide the user's navigation intentionally, rather than overwhelm them with dense information. To support learning and usability, information should be introduced in a phased manner, across a series of interconnected maps. This will ensure that team members can gradually build their understanding of the complex system.

4. Concluding remarks

Understanding the state is a foundational requirement for development practice that comes with many challenges. The challenges include lack of important and updated information shared proactively by the state and lack access to the data on engaging with the state. Complex reporting structures, changing functionaries and the convergence of many departments to provide welfare services makes this challenge a tougher one to solve. This knowledge, that is gained over a period of time, remains tacit and lost with attrition in non-state actor organisations.

Over the years, our team members have consistently used maps to understand how the state functions. We construct such maps for specific sectors or issues we are trying to understand. These maps are constructed specifically for a sector, such as education or nutrition, with the objective of understanding the composition, responsibilities, processes and challenges of the government. In this practice note, we unpack each of these objectives and describe how these maps can be constructed with a focus on pedagogy and knowledge management tools required.

SOLVING THE CHALLENGE OF UNDERSTANDING THE STATE

- We solve the challenge by creating maps
- Constructed for specific sectors as there are differences based on objectives of the state
- Maps are different for each state
- Maps explore composition, responsibilities, processes and challenges among other areas

While constructing the map may require bringing together barefoot associates from the field, researchers and designers, the final product simplifies understanding the state. The maps have the potential of serving as organisational knowledge that can withstand attrition and can support on-boarding new team members or planning interventions when working the state. By solving the challenge of visualising complex government structures, the method stands to solve major information asymmetries among non-state development actors.

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About ResGov

The Foundation for Responsive Governance (ResGov) is a Section 8 not-for-profit working to strengthen the capabilities of government and communities to ensure public initiatives reach the most vulnerable.

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