

Information and Facilitation Counters

Towards Effective Functioning

Indian Institute of Public Administration

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We are hopeful that the Report will help the process of change in the direction of responsive and effective governance and will contribute towards an improved service delivery.

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(Project Director)

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I

Introduction

The Information and Facilitation Counters have been conceived as a step towards administrative reforms and institution of citizen-centric governance. The government of India decided in 1997 to set up Facilitation Counters at the reception at all the Ministries/ Departments of the Government of India for disseminating information to the citizen/ user regarding schemes/ procedures of the organization, forms and applications, and about individual applications. These counters were to be set up in the security-free areas for the convenience of the citizen/ user.

The Concept Note of DARPG emphasized the need for an Information and Facilitation Counter because of the problems faced by the common people during their interaction in government offices. In the absence of an assistance facility, it was felt, a wide gap existed in government to citizen interface. The gap resulted in the benefits of policies and programs not reaching the right people. It also became the breeding ground for intermediaries who often developed an unholy nexus with officers and cutting edge level staff to divert policy gains away from the target group towards other vested interests, thereby affecting policy delivery as well as public trust in administration. The Information and Facilitation Counters were expected to bridge this gap significantly by providing:

- Information regarding services, schemes and procedures through brochures, booklets, reports etc.;
- Information regarding position of waiting lists and applications through computer screens updated every day and through computerized query to Department database;

- Information regarding matters such as bill payment, registrations, land/ House allotment, payment etc. on phone or personally to the public;
- Information regarding time limits and other details through display boards at the Facilitation Counters for completion of various procedures and for disposal of cases;
- Forms to be utilized for various procedures even if the processing had to be done elsewhere;
- Window to receive complaints, issue acknowledgement slips, indicating the section dealing with the complaints.

The IFCs were designed to provide a human face to the Citizen's Charter and enable the citizens to gain access to the information which could facilitate their accessing the policies and programmes meant for them on the one hand and help devise alternative policies and programmes on the other. Easy accessibility to Facilitation Counters for the average citizen and publicity regarding the location and hours of access had to be ensured. Prominently displayed signboard in English and local language and proper direction boards/signages for locating the IFC were considered important. IFCs were also expected to have:

- Appropriate infrastructure to cater to the needs of visitors such as proper layout, sufficient sitting space, proper drinking water and toilet facilities.
- Connectivity i.e. internal and external telephone facility.
- Computer link with the organizational network supported by suitable application software for tracing the movement of references, on-line updation of individual queries and accessing of orders/circulars/instructions in order to provide the status of applications, grievances etc. to the visitors across the counter.
- Interactive Voice System where feasible for enquiry response.
- Photocopying facility for providing copies of applications/schemes etc. to the visitors.

- Availability of sufficient number of copies of pamphlets, booklets, Annual Report, Citizen's Charter etc. for disbursement to the customers/clients/citizens on demand.
- Trained, motivated and courteous, officials having sufficient knowledge of organization, command over English and local language and working knowledge of computer.

IFCs were required to ensure that:

- Visitors Register was maintained and a system was set up for issue of acknowledgements to the visitors.
- IFC was on the mailing list of the organization. All the non-classified orders/documents/forms/orders/instructions/schemes etc. with adequate number of copies were sent to the IFC.
- Complaint/Suggestions Box to obtain customer/visitors feedback was placed at the IFC.

Publicity to generate awareness about IFC was important. For that it was felt that existence of IFC should be mentioned in the brochures, periodicals, departmental website, advertisements etc.; and data related to the activities of IFCs was published in the annual report of the organisation.

In the first phase, 45 such Counters were set up in Ministries/Departments having a large public interface. These were located in Sanchar Bhawan, Shastri Bhawan, Krishi Bhawan, Udyog Bhawan, Nirman Bhawan, Rail Bhawan North Block and Dak Bhawan. The IFCs were made operational in other Ministries later. The initiative involved identifying the location, preparation layout, estimate, financial sanction, requisite software information, display boards, identifying and training the staff for manning the Counter and giving publicity regarding the Counter.

An effective implementation of the vision required an awareness of information and service needs of the people. This also required the streamlining of the internal procedures, the devolution of responsibility to the Under Secretary/Desk Officer level,

and the provision of computer terminals. The Joint Secretary Incharge of Administration was nominated as the nodal officer in this regard.

With a view to providing larger perspective to the initiative, Government of India convened a Conference of Chief Ministers under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister in May 1997. The Conference culminated in an “Action Plan for Effective and Responsive Administration.” Three themes were emphasized as the guiding principles of citizen-centric initiatives as part of the good governance programme. These included (i) accountable and citizen friendly government; (ii) transparency and right to information; and (iii) improving the performance and integrity of the public services. It was decided that IFCs would be set up in all the offices of Central and State Governments to ensure easy access to information and assistance to the public.

The process of setting up the IFCs was carried out with considerable zeal. By 2003, 93 Information Facilitation Counters had been set up by various Ministries/ Departments and the organizations under the administrative control of DARPG. However, many of the Ministries/Departments/Organisations were still without an IFC. The Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs in its 99th Report on Demands for Grants (2003-04) of the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions made the following observations regarding the IFCs:

“While taking note of the information furnished by the Ministry with regard to the setting up of IFCs, the Committee reiterates its earlier view that the Government should monitor each of the Ministries/ Departments/ Organizations who have not set up their IFCs and render necessary assistance thereto and submit a detailed report of its monitoring to the Committee in its ATR”.

At present, as per record of DARPG, there are 109 IFCs. However, some Ministries/Departments, such as, the Ministry of Water Resources, have still not set up their IFC. Some others, such as, the Ministry of Power, have even closed it down. In some cases, the IFC on record is in effect the Reception Counter, or, is engaged in other work.

There was considerable clarity at the time of the institution of this idea about the level of officer who should be designated the responsibility in this regard. A sufficiently senior officer with appropriate orientation, capable of speaking English and local

language for handling customers and knowledge of use of computers was considered appropriate for the job. The Office Memorandum dated 4.12.2003 clearly stated considering officer in the organizational hierarchy may be designated as Contact Officer preferably by rotation so that all the senior level officers get acquainted with the cutting edge level.

The Contact Officer of the Information and Facilitation Counter is the overall in charge of the unit and is the link between the IFC and the mother organization. The Contact Officer had to assess the information needs of the clients, create the corresponding supporting system at IFC, and arrange the posting of suitable personnel and also to motivate them for the assigned job. Therefore, it was considered imperative that a senior level officer not below the rank of Deputy Secretary/ Director should be nominated as the Contact Officer and he/ she should be reporting to the Head of the Department directly. In addition to the duties and responsibilities of the post that the officer held, the duties and responsibilities of the Contact Officers were visualized as under, covering the broad areas of planning, organizing, controlling and supervising:

(A) Planning:

- The Contact Officer will act as a link between the IFC and the mother organization and project the role of IFC before the senior management.
- He/ She will identify the clients/ prospective visitors of the organization and assess their information needs/ possible queries, initially on the basis of substantive functions of the organization and subsequently on the basis of analysis of the visitors' queries.
- He/ She will plan, visualize and install the supporting system, the source of information, flow of information to and from the IFC, the space/ layout and other infrastructure required at the counter.
- He/ She will take steps to create public awareness about existence of IFC through adequate publicity.

(B) Organizing:

- To assess the manpower requirement with job profiles, to identify suitable personnel, preferably the willing ones, for IFC and to arrange their positing.
- To provide proper orientation and motivation to the personnel by clarifying the importance of their work at IFC and its contribution in building the image of the organizations.
- To identify the training needs of the functionaries at IFC and arrange suitable training programmes in behaviour skills, computer operation and other areas of operation.
- To ensure availability of necessary tools like computer with printer, telephone line (internal as well as external), photocopier etc. basic amenities like drinking water/ toilet facilities, proper sitting space for visitors and connectivity with the organization through Local Area Network (LAN).
- To install proper feed back mechanism through visitors' register/ suggestion box and inviting suggestions from NGOs etc.
- To ensure proper signage/ indications for easy access to the IFC.

(C) Controlling:

- To ensure upkeep and tidiness at the counter.
- To ensure punctuality and discipline among the personnel.
- To ensure availability of relevant information material like Annual Report, brochures of schemes, projects of the organization, periodicals, booklets, Citizen's Charter, department Telephone Directory, list of officers dealing with substantive functions along with their telephone Nos., copies of departmental instructions, list of priced publications along with the details of outlets applications form of public usage etc.
- To ensure that IFC is included in the organization's mailing list and all the circulars etc. on policy changes of general interests are set to it.
- To attend to the day-to-day problems/ personal needs of the staff.

- To ensure timely submission of periodical report/ returns by IFC to DARPG.

(D) Supervising:

- Keeping track of complaints/ grievances.
- To scrutinize the visitor register every week.
- To analyze the suggestions/ feedback received through the suggestion box or visitors register and initiate corrective action.
- To conduct surprise/ periodical visits at the counter to see the mannerism and behaviour of the personnel manning IFC.
- To ensure that the telephone queries are being attended to with courtesy and their record is being maintained.
- To see that the names and telephone number of Director of Grievances and the Contact Officer are displayed prominently.
- To arrange visits of the senior officers to the counter.
- To arrange annual O&M inspection the IFC.
- To arrange for wide and regular publicity of the IFC in media.

The Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances not only acts as facilitator for setting up and effective functioning of Information and Facilitation Counters; it also monitors the functioning of IFCs through on-the-spot evaluation studies conducted by the departmental teams/ professional agencies and half-yearly returns prescribed for the purpose.

In accordance with the mandate spelt out for the IFC, the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances has been undertaking periodic inspections/studies to assess the existing state of affairs in the light of the instructions issued out. IFC evaluation has been an ongoing exercise, which finds mention in the annual action plan of the DARPG. As a part of this exercise, eight IFCs were examined in 2006-07. These were: the Department of Personnel and Training, Ministry of Home Affairs, Department of Economic Affairs, Department of Revenue, Department of

Revenue (Customs Excise), Delhi Development Authority, Department of Telecommunications, Department of Post. The Report appreciated the IFC of DDA for its citizen-friendly facilities and made some general observations:

- Staff posted at the IFC need to have proper knowledge of the working of the organization in order to provide the desired facilitation to the visitors. They need to be imparted training for the purpose.
- IFCs are not properly equipped with basic infrastructure required for proper functioning, like, computer, internet facility, photocopiers etc.
- Only one person mans the IFC. He is constrained therefore in collecting information from all sections on a regular basis to provide to the public.
- There is a need to strengthen the IFC as due to its sub optimal performance on their part with respect to the mandated tasks, the stream of visitors has been regularly diminishing.

Scope and Methodology of the Present Study:

The present study examines the state of the IFCs, their functioning, their relevance and capacity to respond to the contemporary needs and the possible ways of addressing the challenges, which confront the IFCs as well as the organisations to which these belong. Thirty-five IFCs, based in Delhi, were visited to assess their physical conditions as well as functioning (a list is provided at Annexure I). Discussions were also held with the Counter Incharges and the users/visitors during the visit to the IFC. Contact Officers were also approached to discuss the issues and problems faced by the IFCs. The observations regarding their physical conditions and the functioning were discussed at a workshop held at IIPA and attended by the Contact Officers of many organizations (a list of participants is provided at Annexure II). The overall state of IFCs is examined in Chapter II of this Report. Chapter III analyses the state of the IFCs visited case by case. The conclusions and recommendations that follow in Chapter IV are based on the field study and discussions held with Contact Persons, Counter Incharges and other officers in the organisations, as also, discussions with civil society groups/ users/ visitors and non-users of IFCs.

II

Information Facilitation Counters: A Status Review

This Chapter provides an overview of the state of IFCs of the Ministries/ Departments/ Organizations of the Government of India. The analysis presented here pertains to the thirty-five IFCs, which have been closely examined from the viewpoint of their effectiveness. The discussion captures the state of the IFCs in terms of (i) access and visibility (ii) infrastructure and facilities © mandate and capacity of IFCs. The capacity of IFCs is examined in terms of both intra-organizational support and human resource availability at the IFC.

1. Access and Visibility

In case of the IFCs, there is a lack of awareness among the possible users in respect of the purpose and capacity of the IFCs to serve the public. The visibility of the IFCs and awareness of their utility are very low at present. Even those who approach the Ministries for various purposes often do not know of the existence of the IFCs and struggle through the difficult process of finding whom to meet and how to meet for some specific purpose. A random check with 300 service users from different social and economic background indicated that less than 20% of them had heard of the IFCs and many of them did not know the purpose served by these.

(i) Display Board Indicating Functions of the Organization

Display board indicating the services rendered by the IFC and direction indicators, which can help the process of publicizing the location and services offered and could thereby increase their demand and utility too, are missed particularly in case of the IFCs located inside or at the backside of the building. As can be seen in the table above in column frequency, 91 per cent of the 35 IFCs visited, do not indicate the mandate of the IFC. The IFC of Industrial Policy and Promotion gives a brief indication of entrepreneurial assistance; the IFC of Urban Land and Development Office and Consular

| Display Board Indicating Functions | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 32 | 91.4 |
| Yes | 3 | 8.6 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table- 1

Passport and Visa Division indicate the functions though the latter does not do so clearly enough. It was not clear whether it was an IFC or simply an office of the Ministry of External Affairs. The IFC of the Ministry of Environment and Forests displays the mandate of the Ministry at the entrance of the IFC. It would be desirable if the mandate of the IFC were displayed in specific terms instead of the broad mandate of the ministry. List of the divisions within the Ministry is mentioned which is useful. However, it is not clear if the IFC provides information and facilitation with respect to all the divisions or only certain specific.

(ii) Direction Indicators to IFCs

In quantitative terms, direction indicators are needed for 21 IFCs out of the 35 visited. For the IFCs situated in the front row at Shastri Bhawan, Krishi Bhawan and Udyog Bhawan, direction indicators may not be needed within the Bhawan, but at the gate itself. The indicators at the gate would in fact serve the purpose of publicizing the facility too. A suitable place may be selected alongside the road near the Bhawan, where a billboard may be put up publicizing the IFCs of the 13 Ministries for which direction indicator has been marked 'not applicable' in the table above.

In Shastri Bhawan, a direction indicator has been put up at the top far left of the building for the IFC of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting which is quite inconspicuous and does not serve the purpose of a direction indicator. There are no direction indicators to enable people to access these without much difficulty. Some of the IFCs are particularly hard to access as for instance, the combined IFC of the Ministries of Youth Affairs and Sports, Culture and HRD.

| Direction Indicators to IFCs | | |
|------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 21 | 60.0 |
| NA | 13 | 37.1 |
| Yes | 1 | 2.9 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table- 1.1

In Udyog Bhawan, there are no direction indicators at all. The IFCs of the Ministry of Steel, Textiles, Department of Commerce, DGFT, IPP and the RTI counter of Heavy Industry are situated at the backside of the building. Without a prominent signboard indicating the presence of the IFCs, and direction indicators leading to them, IFCs would remain inconspicuous and scarcely accessed by the general public.

In Krishi Bhawan, it is quite hard to access the IFCs of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Rural Development and Food and Public Distribution, which are situated at the backside of the Bhawan, in the absence of any direction indicators. The IFC of the Ministry of Labour and Employment at Shram Shakti Bhawan and the IFCs at the Paryavaran and Parivahan Bhawans, are quite inconspicuous in the absence of any sign boards or direction indicators. It is no surprise that these are scarcely visited by members of the general public.

Lack of awareness regarding the services provided at the IFC and lack of publicity along with odd location has made IFCs an underutilized facility by the members of the public.

(iii) IFC Alongside Reception

As is evident from the table below, of the 35 IFCs visited, 11 IFCs are situated alongside the Reception and the other 24, most of which are in the Bhawans, are quite far away from the Reception. It was experienced during the visits that those IFCs that are situated alongside the Reception are better able to facilitate the access of the visitors to

the people sitting inside the security zone as the required pass can be readily made. In the Bhawans, i.e. Shastri Bhawan, Krishi Bhawan, Udyog Bhawan, Shram Shakti Bhawan, and Rail Bhawan, access of people to officers in Ministries remains difficult despite the IFC. A pass is generally made only if (i) a written appointment is shown at the Reception by the visitor, or (ii) the officer calls up the Reception to inform that permission has been granted to the visitor to come up, hence pass may be issued, or (iii) the visitor gets someone along for identification. All the three conditions are quite difficult to meet in practice, hence not in consonance with the Charter programme.

| IFC Alongside Reception | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 24 | 68.6 |
| Yes | 11 | 31.4 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table- 1.2

2. Infrastructure and Facilities

(i) Adequacy of Space

Of the 35 IFCs, 12 IFCs in all have inadequate space. Of these 12, there are three critical cases. IFCs of the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Agriculture and

| Adequacy of Space | | |
|---|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| Cramped for space | 1 | 2.9 |
| Cramped for space, no ventilation | 3 | 8.6 |
| Inadequate space | 8 | 22.9 |
| Not within the IFC but at the Reception alongside | 3 | 8.6 |
| Reasonable space | 20 | 57.1 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table- 2.1

Cooperation, combined IFC of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports and Culture, and Human Resource Development are cramped for space. These are highly uncomfortable facilities, both for the staff who have to attend at the IFC and for the visitors. In none of these three IFCs can two visitors be attended at a time. There is no ventilation and cleaning is also not regularly done. Relative to these extreme cases, some other IFCs have been marked 'with sufficient space'.

(ii) Computer and Printer

Computer and printer are the most basic facilities in any government office in the present context. While most IFCs do have a computer with printer, the IFC of the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy Sources was an exception.

| Computer and Printer | | |
|----------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 1 | 2.9 |
| Yes | 33 | 94.3 |
| Yes but out of order | 1 | 2.9 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table-2.2

(iii) Photocopier

A photocopier has not been provided in 18 of the 35 IFCs. Only 15 IFCs had a photocopier in working condition. It is not difficult to imagine the kind of problems visitors face when they approach the IFC for a piece of information which may not become available because of the inability to get it photocopied. Ministry of Food and Public Distribution and Railways have a photocopier. However, it is not in a working condition in the former and is too old and needs to be replaced in case of the latter. Both have underlined the urgency of being provided a photocopier. IFCs of the Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Land and Development Office, Department of Commerce, Ministry of Steel, DoPT, Ministry of Home Affairs, Textiles, Heavy Industry, Railways, Combined IFC of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports,

| Photocopier | | |
|------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 18 | 51.4 |
| Yes -Not Working | 2 | 5.7 |
| Yes | 15 | 42.9 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table- 2.3

Culture and HRD, Ministry of Corporate Affairs, PRO's office (CBDT), I&B, DGFT, and Ministry of New and Renewable Energy Sources, Labour and Employment emphasized the need for a photocopier. The IFCs of IPP, DoT, combined IFC of the Coal and Mines expressed that they could access it in the Section above quite easily and were not as keen on getting the same.

(iv) Telephonic Access

Some IFCs did not have a direct telephone line and felt that it was necessary. The

| Telephonic Access | | |
|-------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| | 1 | 2.9 |
| No | 2 | 5.7 |
| Yes | 32 | 91.4 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table- 2.4

IFC desks of the DoPT and Home Affairs regretted that they had been provided only an intercom connection and not a separate line. IFC of the Ministry of Shipping, Road Transport and Highways share the line with the library and felt that a separate line is should be provided for this IFC as well.

(v) Touch-Screen Kiosk

A touch-screen kiosk is considered useful for the lay users, who come look for relevant information. Twenty-six of the thirty-five IFCs, however, did not have a touch screen kiosk.

| Touch-Screen Kiosk | | |
|--------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 26 | 74.3 |
| Needed | 3 | 8.6 |
| Yes | 6 | 17.1 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table- 2.5

The touch screen kiosk lay unutilized at the IFCs of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperation and the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy Sources. Kiosk at the IFC of the Ministry of Environment and Forests had no database on it. RTI applications and Public Grievances could not be tracked at the kiosk at the IFC of Urban Land and Development Office, though people use it for getting other substantive land related information kiosks at DDA were also put to use especially by the computer literate. Staff facilitation is needed which also needs to be proactive in nature. The Counter Incharge at the CBDT, Consumer Affairs, IPP, Post, expressed that they would benefit from the kiosk. Kiosks would be useful for all those organisations that have large public interface, such as Railways, Posts, Passports office, etc. A kiosk should be set up only after a need assessment exercise. The quarterly report that is sent to the DARPG should mention the status of its use and what other database is required to make it more useful.

(vi) Drinking Water and Toilet Facility

Even the most basic of the facilities, viz. drinking water and toilet were not with the easy reach of many of the IFCs. It was found that as many as 65% of the IFCs visited did not have easy access to drinking water and in case of 83% IFCs there was no toilet facility within a reasonable distance. There is a water cooler outside the IFC of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment at Shastri Bhawan. Other IFCs in the front row have to access water from it. Staff at the IFC of the Ministry of I&B has to access

water at the third floor. Except the IFC of Health and Family Welfare, DGFT, DGS&D, DoT, Shipping, Road Transport and Highways, FIPB, I&B, Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy Sources, access to these basic facilities is difficult in all the other IFCs. However, water cooler at the IFC of DoT was not in working condition, and the toilet at DGS&D was quite badly kept.

| Drinking Water and Toilet Facility | | | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------|---------|-----------------|---------|
| | Drinking Water | | Toilet Facility | |
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 23 | 65.7 | 29 | 82.9 |
| Yes | 11 | 31.4 | 6 | 17.1 |
| Yes (water cooler not working) | 1 | 2.9 | | |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 2.6

(vii) Air Conditioning

Many of the IFCs are poorly ventilated. Some of them like the IFCs of the Ministry of Rural Development, Consumer Affairs, Food and Public distribution, and DGS&D and Department of Commerce are not air conditioned either. Surprisingly, the IFC of the Department of Commerce does not even have a ceiling fan. Given this state of IFCs and given the fact that these offer little opportunity to the personnel deployed there

| Air Conditioning | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 4 | 11.4 |
| No (Cooler is there) | 1 | 2.9 |
| No (Not even a ceiling fan) | 1 | 2.9 |
| Yes | 29 | 82.9 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 2.7

for career development or job satisfaction it is not difficult to understand why the IFCs are considered a punishment posting in most organisations.

(viii) Repair/Maintenance

| Repair/Maintenance | | |
|--------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| Average | 12 | 34.3 |
| Good | 11 | 31.4 |
| Poor | 9 | 25.7 |
| Very Good | 3 | 8.6 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 2.8

As is evident from the table above, the state of repair and maintenance is only average to poor in 21 IFCs. The state of some IFCs is too pathetic to invite service users. There were cobwebs in the IFC of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs! Staff at the IFC of the Ministry of Small Scale and Medium Enterprises reported frequent pest attacks at the IFC. Comparatively well-kept IFCs are the IFC of DGFT, Coal and Mines, Chemicals and Petrochemicals and Fertilizers (recently upgraded), and Environment and Forest.

3. Mandate and Service Delivery

The mandate of IFC requires first and foremost the availability of information for supply as well as for planning facilitation. Availability of scheme booklets, work allocation chart, copy of departmental instructions, Charter availability, availability of forms, the extent of connectivity within the organisation influence the possibilities of facilitation. The position with regard to these as well as the actual functions being undertaken by the IFCs give a fair idea about the effectiveness of IFCs vis-à-vis their mandate.

(i) Availability of Scheme Booklets

The visit to the IFCs revealed that print information is not being communicated readily at the IFCs. Nearly 63 per cent of the IFCs visited did not have print information, such as, scheme booklets for dissemination.

| Availability of Scheme Booklets | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 22 | 62.9 |
| Yes | 13 | 37.1 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.1

There is lack of intra organisational coordination in this regard. Someone up the hierarchy needs to be specifically mandated to ensure regular supply of print information. Another issue is communicating information from states to the IFC at Delhi, or making information available at the State and District offices through the IFCs at that level. Besides, there are multiple offices for dissemination of print material. Information regarding the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is available at 15 different offices in Delhi. These should be available at the IFC too to make it serve as a single window information dissemination center. The IFC should provide a single window for all types of information pertaining to the Ministry/Organisation. For this to happen, both vertical and horizontal networking is crucial. Availability of these and other print material, which may facilitate the utilization of schemes by the target groups is crucial at the IFC, if the IFC is expected to facilitate the effective utilization of schemes.

(ii) Work Allocation Chart

In order to facilitate the visitors to meet the right people within the organization, it is important that the Counter Incharge is apprised of all latest developments within the organization about the work allocation and various departmental instructions issued from time to time. While such information is provided by some organisations with sufficient seriousness and regularity, several IFCs suffer from lack of information in this regard. Only 16 of the 35 IFCs visited admitted of having received the work allocation chart.

| Work Allocation Chart | | |
|-----------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| | 2 | 5.7 |
| No | 14 | 40.0 |
| No (Only for RTI) | 1 | 2.9 |
| No information | 2 | 5.7 |
| Yes | 16 | 45.7 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.2

It is preferable that updated work allocation chart is provided online as for instance is being done in the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance. Hard copy of the work allocation chart prepared by the O&M unit is not kept updated. The latest chart available at the IFC of Ministry of Corporate Affairs is of July 2001.

(iii) Copy of Departmental Instructions

Copies of departmental instructions are not communicated to more than 50 percent of the IFCs visited. Only 8 of the 35 IFCs admitted of having been communicated

| Copy of Departmental Instructions | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| | 2 | 5.7 |
| Communicated | 8 | 22.9 |
| Communicated Online | 2 | 5.7 |
| No information | 1 | 2.9 |
| Not Communicated | 19 | 54.3 |
| Not Communicated Regularly | 2 | 5.7 |
| Only regarding transfers and postings | 1 | 2.9 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.3

departmental instructions. Two of them mentioned that these were available online. In some cases, these were occasionally communicated. In the absence of regular communication of such information, inquiries from the people regarding the latest position are quite hard to face at the office where public interaction takes place

(iv) Charter Availability

IFCs are expected to be the physical face of the Citizen’s Charter. The Charter is expected to become effective through the IFCs. The availability of the Charter at the IFC can be instrumental in ensuring the accountability of the organization as well as the IFC in matter of facilitation, where its responsibilities are duly stated.

| Charter Availability | | |
|----------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 24 | 68.6 |
| NA | 3 | 8.6 |
| Yes | 8 | 22.9 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.4

Hard copy of the Citizen’s Charter of the organization, however, was not available for dissemination in any IFC that was visited. A copy was available only in 8 IFCs out of the 35 visited. It is ironic that many IFC staff are also not aware of the existence of a Charter of the Ministry/Organisation and the purpose which it is meant to serve.

(v) Availability of Forms

In more than fifty percent of the IFCs, no forms were available at all. In some of these, more forms, other than the RTI were available. The IFC of the IPP keeps all forms and along with forms provides information regarding how they should be filled up. This practice should be followed in other IFCs as well.

| Availability of Forms | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| | 1 | 2.9 |
| No | 18 | 51.4 |
| No (In concession wing and PSUs) | 1 | 2.9 |
| N (Only RTI forms) | 1 | 2.9 |
| Yes | 14 | 40.0 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.5

(vi) Internet and Intranet connectivity

Connectivity with other organizations as well as internally is quite important for any IFC which seeks to facilitate the service users. Availability of information about the organizational activities as well as possibility of rapid communication of the requirements to and from the division heads is crucial for the IFC to effectively carry out its mandate. Internet connection has been provided at all the IFCs visited, except One of the thirty-five IFCs, the IFC of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, which, in effect, is the PG cell of the organization being the exception, which too was in the process of being made available. However, the much needed intra-organisational

| Internet and Intranet connectivity | | | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------|---------|----------------|---------|
| | Internet | | Intranet | |
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| No | 1 | 2.9 | 2 | 5.7 |
| Yes | 34 | 97.1 | 29 | 82.9 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 | 4 | 11.4 |
| | | | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.6

databases are not available to any significant extent at any of the IFCs. In 29 of the 35 IFCs, which were visited, Intra-net was not available. At the IFC of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare it was learnt that intra-organisational connectivity and networking required that passwords to the databases of attached and subordinate offices and also field organisations are provided at the IFCs. In case of most IFCs, this is still not the effected.

(vii) Report on the Activities of the IFC

An important mechanism to ensure the effectiveness of the IFCs is the requirement of preparing a submitting a Report on its activities, which may then be analysed by the authority to which it is submitted. While several of the IFCs do prepare some kind of a Report, this is not done by all of these. Nearly 26 per cent of the IFCs visited simply do not prepare a Report. The Report is a mere formality in some cases and is never taken up for either planning or review of activities. IFCs of the Ministries of

| Report on the Activities of the IFC | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| | 3 | 8.6 |
| In O&M Unit | 1 | 2.9 |
| In PG section | 1 | 2.9 |
| In Section | 1 | 2.9 |
| Information asked for from IFC | 1 | 2.9 |
| No | 9 | 25.7 |
| No information | 2 | 5.7 |
| Only on RTI | 1 | 2.9 |
| Yes | 16 | 45.7 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.7

Rural Development, LDO of Urban Development and Poverty Alleviation, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, DGFT, Ministry of Steel, Chemicals and Petrochemicals, Social Justice and Empowerment do not prepare any report on the activities of the IFC. In some other cases, information is asked for from the IFC, and report is prepared elsewhere, such as in the O&M unit regarding IPP, and in the PG section regarding DoT and Post, in the Section regarding FIPB and I&B. The Report should not only be prepared but also shared by the IFCs with the public.

(viii) IFC and RTI Applications

In the absence of requisite facilities to carry out their mandate of facilitation, most IFCs have in the changed context of RTI got to being a point for collecting RTI applications.

| IFC and RTI Applications | | |
|--|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| Applications are received and can be tracked | 1 | 2.9 |
| Applications received but cannot be tracked | 28 | 80.0 |
| Every officer is a CPIO for RTI applications for his jurisdiction | 1 | 2.9 |
| RTI applications are not received | 2 | 5.7 |
| RTI cell is separate, applications are received and forwarded, though status cannot be tracked | 3 | 8.6 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.8

All the IFCs, which were visited, took RTI applications except two. RTI applications however, cannot be tracked at most of the IFCs. While it is important that RTI applications are received at the IFC, being taken over by the RTI concerns defeats the very purpose of the IFC. Some IFCs are only functioning as RTI desks. Among these are the IFCs of the Ministry of Chemicals and Petrochemicals and Department of Fertilizers, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Ministry of

| Only RTI work carried out at the IFC | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| | 3 | 8.6 |
| Yes | 9 | 25.7 |
| No | 22 | 62.9 |
| Not even RTI | 1 | 2.9 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table- 3.9

Coal. Facilitation work is being willfully de-emphasized in the IFC of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperation in favor of RTI work, which has been adjusted in the meager space provided to the IFC. IFCs are drowning in the sea of RTI rather than working in a proactive manner that could reduce the very need for the service users to resort to the RTI.

(ix) IFC and Public Grievances

Grievances were being received in nearly 63 percent of the IFCs. In case of 5 IFCs, these could also be tracked. In case of 17 IFCs, however, this possibility was not there. Communication between the IFC and the PG cell in organizations being quite poor, it is not possible to track the status of public grievances at IFCs. That would be possible if CPGRAMS and the local PGARMS are operative at the IFCs.

| IFC and Public Grievances | | |
|---|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| | 1 | 2.9 |
| Grievances are not received | 12 | 34.3 |
| Grievances are received and can be tracked | 5 | 14.3 |
| Grievances are received and forwarded, status cannot be tracked | 17 | 48.6 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.10

The PGRAMS, whether centralised or local, is not operative at 65 percent of the IFCs. These include the Ministries of Rural Development, Consumer Affairs, Food and Public

| PGRAMS software at IFC | | |
|---|----------------|---------|
| Status | Number of IFCs | Percent |
| | 3 | 8.6 |
| No | 22 | 62.9 |
| Withdrawn due to staff constraint | 1 | 2.9 |
| Yes | 8 | 22.9 |
| Yes , not used because of staff constraints | 1 | 2.9 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.11

Distribution, Agriculture and Cooperation, Department of Commerce, Steel, Textile, Heavy Industry and IPP, Coal and Mines, Corporate Affairs, Petroleum and Natural Gas, HRD, DoT, FIPB, Home Affairs, New and Renewable Energy Sources, Environment and Forest, Labour and Employment and I&B. It was withdrawn due to staff constraint at DGS&D and Health and Family Welfare. The software is operative in the PG cell in Ministry of Home Affairs where Senior officers have been directed to access it directly. Even for grievances sent in through other means it should be possible to track the status at the IFC. Updates in this regard should be communicated to the IFC. However, other facilitation responsibilities should not be abandoned for the sake of this, which requires capacity building at the IFC.

(x) Staff Position at the IFCs

The effective functioning of IFCs requires more than anything else a strong and efficient staff to execute the mandate. The most disturbing reality of IFCs is that most IFCs have a meager staff strength, making it quite difficult for them to undertake their responsibilities in an effective manner. 11 of the 35 IFCs surveyed were found to be operating without any support staff. The contact persons sits in the security zone in most cases, leaving the IFC to the Counter Incharge, who is often not a very senior officer. The Counter Incharge also runs errands. The 11 referred are: IFC of the Ministry of Rural

| Designation of Counter Incharge | | |
|---|-------------|---------|
| | No. of IFCs | Percent |
| | 3 | 8.6 |
| SO | 9 | 25.7 |
| Assistant | 8 | 22.9 |
| UDC | 3 | 8.6 |
| PRO | 3 | 8.6 |
| Asstt. Director | 1 | 2.9 |
| Consultant | 1 | 2.9 |
| Counselor | 1 | 2.9 |
| DDG-PG/PR | 1 | 2.9 |
| Deputy Director cum APIO cum Facilitation Incharge | 1 | 2.9 |
| Personal Secretary | 1 | 2.9 |
| Project Officer | 1 | 2.9 |
| Under Secretary | 2 | 5.7 |
| Total | 35 | 100.0 |

Table 3.12

Development, Consumer Affairs, Agriculture, Medium Small and Micro Enterprises, Department of Commerce, Ministry of Textile, Department of Heavy Industry, Coal and Mines, Post, New and Renewable Energy Sources, and Labour and Employment. This is hardly a desirable state of affairs. Situation in this regard needs to be remedied if IFCs have more than a mere symbolic significance.

(xi) Accountability and Reporting

Reporting mechanism as well as public sharing of information about IFCs is poorly addressed. The annual Reports of several Ministries and Departments have even failed to mention about the IFCs not to speak of reflecting on their performance. As is

evident from the table below, these include some of the Ministries/ Departments which have a large public interface. Some of them of course have not even set up the IFC.

| Status of IFC in the Annual Report | |
|--|--|
| Ministry/Department | Whether IFC appears in Annual Report |
| Ministry of Civil Aviation | No IFC |
| Ministry of Coal | No |
| Ministry of Environment and Forests | No |
| Ministry of External Affairs | No IFC |
| Ministry of HRD | Yes |
| Ministry of Information and Broadcasting | Yes |
| Ministry of Labour and Employment | No |
| Ministry of Mines | Yes |
| Ministry of New and Renewable Energy Sources | No |
| Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas | No |
| Ministry of Railways | Yes |
| Ministry of Shipping Road Transport and Highways | Yes |
| Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises | Yes |
| Ministry of Corporate Affairs | The Ministry's IFC has not been mentioned in the Annual Report. However, Para 7.310 of the 2006-07 Annual Report indicates setting up of 'Registrar's Front Offices' as facilitation centers at 52 locations throughout the country. |
| Ministry of Culture | No |
| Ministry of Defense | No IFC |
| Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region | No IFC |
| Ministry of Earth Sciences | No |

| | |
|---|--|
| Ministry of Health and Family Welfare | Yes. Para 1.13of the last Annual Report indicates the location of the Ministry's IFC and the facilities it offers. |
| Ministry of Home Affairs | No |
| Ministry of Power | No IFC |
| Ministry of Rural Development | No |
| Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment | No |
| Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation | No IFC |
| Ministry of Steel | No |
| Ministry of Textiles | Yes, but very briefly just to mention the IFC's location and receipt of complaints there. |
| Ministry of Tourism | No IFC |
| Ministry of Tribal Affairs | No IFC |
| Ministry of Water Resources | No IFC |
| Ministry of Women and Child Development | No IFC |
| Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports | Yes ,The first chapter with title 'Organization' of the 2007-08 Annual Report indicates only the location of the Ministry's IFC. |
| Department of Agriculture and Cooperation | No |
| Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries and Agriculture Research and Extension | Part of the IFC of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperation |
| Department of Biotechnology | No IFC |
| Department of Chemicals and Petrochemicals | No |
| Department of Commerce | Yes, but very briefly indicating the location |
| Department of Consumer Affairs | No |
| Department of Fertilizers | Yes, but very briefly, just to mention that "Public Information Centre' of the Department at Shastri Bhawan receives RTI applications. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Department of Food and Public Distribution | Yes, but very briefly indicating the location and facilities in para 6.3 |
| Department of Heavy Industries | No IFC- only RTI counter |
| Department of Heavy Industry | No |
| Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion | The chapter on Citizen's Charter mentions the Department's IFC at Udyog Bhawan. |
| Department of Information Technology | No IFC |
| Department of Personnel and Training | Yes |
| Department of Posts | No |
| Department of Public Enterprises | No IFC |
| Department of Road Transport and Highways | Yes |
| Department of Science and Technology | No IFC |
| Department of Telecommunications | No |

Table 3.13

Conclusion

To sum up the above analysis, IFCs are faced with a serious problem of visibility and accessibility, infrastructure support and human resource constraints, which affect their capacity to deliver their mandate. Starved of information themselves, the IFCs are not able to fulfill their primary objective of facilitation and have started drifting towards becoming a mere collection centre for the RTI and PG applications. This is happening not in addition to but at the expense of ignoring the vision which guided their creation. It is important that the specific dimensions of the problems faced by the specific IFCs are examined and addressed in the context of their precise responsibilities, constraints and opportunities. Organisational accountability in this regard is also quite low and needs to be strengthened in the interest of performance.

III

Information Facilitation Counters: Case Studies

The state of Information Facilitation Counters calls for a close study of the physical conditions, issues of accessibility, awareness, services, information availability, organizational support and capacity for service delivery. There are significant variations in the status as well as utilisation of the IFCs and the reasons for these vary too. It is important therefore to look into the functioning of the IFCs in the context of their own organization and its purpose as well as the possibilities offered by it to address the problem areas if any. What follows is a case by case discussion of the conditions and functioning of thirty five IFCs, which were visited by the team. These include the IFCs of organizations with large public interface as well those with a limited outreach. The cases cover Ministries, Departments and their attached/subordinate organizations.

I

IFCs of Ministries

IFC of the Ministry of Agriculture

The IFC of the Ministry of Agriculture is situated on the front row at Krishi Bhawan. However, a pass has to be obtained for approaching it, which makes access somewhat difficult. The purpose served by the facility, including the divisions served is not mentioned clearly through the display board/banner that is put at the entrance. This makes it difficult for people to know of the purpose, which can be served by it. It is noteworthy that the IFC caters to the Department of Agriculture Research and Extension, Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying besides the Department of Agriculture and Cooperation. It is noteworthy that the Department of Agriculture and Cooperation is responsible for the formulation and implementation of national policies and programmes aimed at achieving rapid agricultural growth through optimum utilization of the country's

land, water, soil and plant resources. It has close to twenty-one divisions. The Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying is involved in the development of requisite infrastructure in States/ UTs for improving productivity; preservation and protection of livestock through provision of health care; strengthening of central livestock farms (cattle, sheep and poultry) for development of superior germ plasma for distribution to states and expansion of aquaculture in fresh and brackish water, and welfare of fisher-folk etc.

Set up in 1997, the IFC has not been upgraded since. The room is poorly ventilated, which makes it very hard for the staff to sustain their physical presence. There is no drinking water or toilet facility at the IFC. There is no seating arrangement for the visitors. The IFC does not have a separate telephone or a fax machine. There is no photocopier either. The telephone and the photocopier belong to the RTI wing. The IFC shares the telephone with the RTI Counter, which has been accommodated within the IFC despite lack of space. There is now no space for visitors to sit. The staff generally looks at the RTI wing as a threat to the IFC not because it has outlived its utility but because the resources are now being diverted towards the RTI. Funds are increasingly being put into the RTI facilities, whereas, most facilities have been withdrawn from the IFC. The RTI Counter has been accommodated within the IFC, which is already constrained for space. The space meant for seating visitors has been taken over by the RTI wing. The visitors have to keep standing while they wait for the information, which they need from the IFC. The RTI Counter, it is contended, should be separately located rather than be a part of the IFC. In effect, however, the two functions should support each other.

Visitors to the IFC, informed the Counter Incharge, included representatives from NGOs, Resident Commissioners of States, Ex-MPs and MLAs who want information for their respective constituencies, even representatives from foreign embassies. There are also poor visitors who often come from far-flung states to get the facilitation with regard to the farming schemes in operation in their areas. A visitor's register is maintained, which carries details about the purpose of visit, information sought and the organization to which the visitor is referred. It serves a significant purpose if the IFC wants to look at its own role and expectations of the concerned public. Discussions with the Counter Incharge revealed that on an average about 25000 persons visited the IFC annually till

about two years back. Since then, the number of visitors has come down to around 12000 annually. From November 2007 to March 2008, 1072 visitors had approached the IFC for queries related to agriculture. The staff attributes the declining number of visitors to the waning facilities at the IFC. Earlier, all the divisions were networked with NICNET. That facility has now been withdrawn.

RTI applications as well as public grievances are received at the IFC. The Counter Incharge has also been mandated to pick up grievances from newspapers and communicate them to the concerned officials who file them and can take necessary action. The staff, however, was unable to cite any recent examples of such grievances picked from newspapers and communicated upwards. There is a suggestion box at the IFC. However, it is not much in use- it is too small to put in any piece of paper and performs more of a ceremonial function. The IFC has also been saddled with handling court cases and this is considered an unnecessary burden, which should be done away with as it dilutes the focus from information dissemination.

The IFC is expected to provide information about the schemes and services of the Ministry. However, there is very little information available in print. Only the Annual Report was available at the Counter when it was visited. The required information is not being provided by the division heads. The staff at the IFC was somewhat skeptical of the utility of putting information on the web site and appeared to be heavily inclined towards dissemination of information in print form. The non-availability of information, which can be readily offered, causes considerable hardship to the visitors. Online procedures, it was felt, were not used by the common people who preferred instead information in print, in Hindi or in regional languages, which could communicate to them the potential inherent in the schemes in their respective areas and the possibilities of accessing these. Regarding downloaded forms, it was pointed out that only RTI forms were being downloaded. People did not generally use the web site for other procedures.

The lack of initiative, even reluctance on the part of division heads to supply information about schemes and services in print form is regretted by the IFC staff. Copies of the Information Handbook brought out by the Ministry under the RTI Act as per the format prescribed by the Department of Personnel were not available in the IFC; nor were

they downloaded from the website in case the visitors ask for the same. A copy of the Ministry's Citizen's Charter, which gives the mandate of the IFC, was made available on request. It only serves a ceremonial purpose. However, it was not on display at the IFC. Nor was there any display board indicating the kind of information that can be availed at the IFC. The touch screen facility is not being used at the IFC.

Over the years, the horizontal and vertical diffusion of agriculture-related tasks has resulted in the rise of multiple organisations within or outside the rubric of the Ministry. People come to the IFC for guidance and information related to "Agriculture." They are guided to the relevant organization at the IFC of the Ministry of Agriculture, which acts more as a coordinating office than information centre. The IFC of the Ministry with a one-member staff caters to all the three Departments of the Ministry and the twenty-one divisions of the Department of Agriculture itself. Since NICNET has been withdrawn there is no question of accessing database of these divisions and departments. The existing staff did not feel confident enough to handle the expectations of visitors pertaining to all these activities. The need for a professional group at the IFC to address the diverse information requirements of visitors was underlined by the staff quite emphatically.

The state of the IFC reflects poorly on the faith placed by the organisation in its capacity to deliver its objectives. When the IFC was set up, there was a staff of four to manage it. Staff strength has since gone down to one. There is no support staff at present. The IFC has been put within the section, as presently there is no officer designated to head the IFC. Existing staff of the IFC feels that an officer of the rank of Deputy Secretary/Director should head the IFC and should perform the specific task of intra-Ministry coordination in terms of collating information from the division heads and ensuring that it is communicated to the IFC in print form. At present, the half-yearly reports, which are prepared, are sent to the O & M division in the Ministry, which does the coordination work regarding preparation of the Annual Report.

The lack of training given to the Counter Incharge regarding the possible ways of enhancing their facilitation role and apprising them of the functioning of the organisation would have a bearing on the performance of the IFC, which could improve if the staff

posted at the headquarters of the organization was well conversant with the schemes in operation at the field level as well the functioning of various organisations attached to the Ministry. However, there are other serious interventions, which invite attention if citizens have to benefit from the various services/ programmes/ schemes. Taking facilitation mechanism closer to the points of need is important if agriculture-related facilitation has to really take place.

The IFC needs to undertake activities aimed at providing the much needed information and access to the agricultural community of India. It should store all farmer-related information like best farming practices, high yielding varieties of seeds, suitability in relation to soil health, fertilizer requirement, best practices in organic farming, water geology and prices of seeds and fertilizers as well as prices of agricultural produce at various districts which the farmers can hope to get. The extension service has fallen off in the rural areas. Since the IFC caters to the Department of Agriculture Research and Education, it should have a mentoring role with regard to the extension workers. For that, it would need to be well equipped with region specific GSI data and a professional team of scientists to cater to the varied information requirements of extension workers all over the country. The IFC can develop a network with all concerned organisations through the web so that it can function as a single window for users.

There is a need to ensure effective information dissemination at the state and district levels. There are information dissemination centers other than the IFC, such as the Kisan Vikas Kendras in the country, which are now 426 in number. The remaining rural districts are to be gradually covered. Besides, the Kisan Call Centre scheme has been functioning. The Call Centres can be accessed by the farmers all over the country on common toll free number. The aforesaid facilities have not been appropriately linked up with the IFC.

IFC of the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises

The IFC of the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises is located at Nirman Bhawan on the front side of the building. It is visible across the road and is easy to access. The banner at the entrance, however, does not say very clearly if the IFC

provides information and facilitation with respect to all the attached, subordinate and field offices of the organization. This is an air-conditioned facility. The IFC has sufficient space though seating arrangement can accommodate only two persons at a time. This is because Office of the Director of Publicity and Advertising is also a part of the IFC. The IFC staff feels that there are several constraints regarding physical infrastructure at the IFCs. It is presently situated, like several other IFCs in the Bhawans, in a garage, without proper ventilation, drinking water or toilet facility. The IFC was upgraded more than five years ago. There is no genset/ inverter for power failures.

Discussions with the Counter Incharge revealed that not more than three to four visitors approach the IFC on a day. This is clearly an indication of lack of awareness about the IFC and its utility among the people. A survey of visitors revealed that people approached the IFC to seek significant guidelines and information regarding schemes of the Ministry, SSI Act for self-employment purposes, information on reimbursement status on ISO-9000, possible loans for SSIs, purchase policy, or research input for academic purposes. Most visitors during the visit conveyed that they were duly facilitated by the IFC staff. RTI applications are received at the Counter. The IFC claims to maintain a proactive communication with clients in respect of the applications submitted by them. The applications can be tracked at the IFC telephonically or in person. Not many grievances are being received in the organization from the people. The reason for this, according to the Counter Incharge, is that already active dissemination of schemes and services is being carried out and required facilitation is being provided. Tracking of grievances is possible only at the office end, through the CPGRAM, which is operational at the IFC.

Annual Report and some other printed material on schemes and services were available at the IFC when it was visited. Some forms were available too. The Citizen's Charter was not displayed anywhere in the IFC; nor was it available in hard copy form. The visitors who are offered free documents are required to make an entry to that effect in the visitor's register- this is intended to ensure documentary evidence that information was actually provided free of cost and to prevent any possible misappropriation by the staff itself.

The IFC does not reflect any effective intra-organisational networking. The database of attached and subordinate offices as well as field offices is not networked with the IFC. Networking is largely through telephone, not through computer database. According to the Director, Advertising and Publicity, who is also the Contact Person for the IFC, the concept of IFC needed change towards proactive information communication from its side. A section on the IFC appears in the Annual Report of the Ministry of MSEM. Publicity has also been given through the print media and the web site of the Ministry. Details of the IFC have been provided on the departmental web site of the Ministry. Though work allocation chart is made available, copies of departmental instructions are not provided to the IFC. The latter is considered important to enable the staff at the IFC to effectively facilitate the visitors.

There is a four member staff, including the Counter Incharge, and two Section Officers. Designation of the Counter Incharge is Assistant Director. The IFC of this Ministry lacks a team of professional persons to attend to all requirements. Sufficient staff with clarity in knowledge is needed. The officers responsible for the IFC underlined the need for a separate cadre for IFC personnel, which is trained technically and is attitudinally suited to facilitate people as per their varying requirements. The need for periodic orientation of officers and periodic visits of officers from DARPG for upkeep of performance was also emphasized during discussions. Besides, regularly updated digital and print information and sufficient space for comfortable seating arrangements are required for improving the utility and effectiveness of the IFC. Generally, the personnel at the headquarters are not aware of the functions performed and the schemes in operation at the field level. As a result, they are often not in a position to handle various queries that they receive from people coming in from across the country. Those posted at the IFC should therefore be apprised of the work done by their organization at the cutting edge level to be in a better position to handle the queries/provide facilitation to the users, for which, dedicated training needs to be provided apart from specific recruitment.

Proactive identification of information needs of people through the district offices of MSEM and an engagement with NGOs and stakeholders can help improve the transparency and accountability of the organization and further the possibilities of effective facilitation. The contact person for the IFC of MSEM pointed out that

communications from DARPG do not reach the person manning the IFC. These are sent to the Joint Secretary. These could instead be directly sent to the IFCs. Surprisingly, the IFC does not prepare any periodic report on the number of queries etc. received and the facilitation provided to the visitors. This is essential for any review or analysis of the information needs and preparation for its dissemination through the IFC.

IFC of the Ministry of Labour and Employment

The IFC of the Ministry of Labour and Employment is at the ground floor of the Shram Shakti Bhawan. At the entrance, there is a combined reception of the Ministry of Labour and Employment and the Ministry of Power, which displays information about where to put in RTI applications and public grievances, and who the Public Information Officers and the Appellate authorities in respect of public grievances and RTI are. The IFC is very inconspicuous towards the left side at the Shram Shakti Bhawan. One would not know of its existence unless one was specifically briefed about its location. Details of the IFC are not available on the departmental web site though the Citizen's Charter of the Ministry mentions it.

It is a small office but comfortable with the required facilities. There is a photocopier, a computer with printer, air- conditioning and a comparatively good seating arrangement for the visitors. PG and RTI Cell are separate and are located inside the security zone. There is practically no support staff available. The IFC has not been upgraded in the last five years, we were told. There appeared to be a somewhat limited understanding of upgradation, which is understood only as an exercise in maintenance and repair and not revision of mandate to enhance scope and improve interface with the public in any way.

The IFC received, we were informed, about ten to twelve visitors per day. The visitors approached it for a wide range of reasons:

- To seek information to resolve service related problems like retirement, compensation under the Industrial Disputes Act, payment of gratuity etc.

- To obtain information regarding guidelines and schemes for grants-in-aid to NGOs by the Ministry of Labour and Employment.
- To know of the procedure for starting new institutes/trades/units as per prescribed norms of NCVT.
- To get Forms for grants-in-aid for academic and voluntary organisations/NGOs for undertaking research in approved labour matters
- To seek information relating to verification of ITI trades and certificates by NCVT
- To take copies of the Annual Reports of the Ministry.
- To seek guidance on how to obtain information under the RTI Act, 2005.
- To get information for CPI nos. as compiled by Labour Bureau every month.
- To get Information regarding PM's Shram Awards, Vishwakarma Awards, National Safety Awards, National Safety Awards (Factories and Mines).
- To obtain other miscellaneous information – people from the Industrial Trade Institutes, for instance, come to take affiliation forms.

When visited, it was found that even a hard copy of the Ministry's Charter was not available at the Counter. Some printed publications of the Ministry, however, were available. A copy of the RTI Act was also available. According to the Counter Incharge, besides the increasing availability of information on the web site, which has reduced the number of visitors to the IFC, there have been other factors, which lessened the responsibilities borne by the IFC. Immigration clearance, for instance, is now provided by the Overseas Indian Affairs in the Ministry of External Affairs, and this has considerably reduced the workload on the IFC. RTI applications and public grievances are received at the IFC though both the RTI Cell and the PG Cell are located separately inside the security zone. The need for better connectivity between the RTI Cell and the IFC was emphasized as "people seek guidance regarding the process for obtaining

information under the RTI Act.” People are facilitated to meet the officers sitting inside the security zone.

In effect, a large part of facilitation responsibilities are exercised outside the framework of IFC. The Ministry has a programme to take its schemes and services for the welfare of workers in the unorganized sector to the people through the information kiosks at local levels, which are proposed to be managed by the Insurance Companies. Smart cards are to be issued to workers in the organized sector, which can be used by them to avail of the provident fund and pension schemes. This would not involve the IFC though information dissemination would be carried out at the district offices.

The Counter Incharge informed that there is no system of updating information online for individual queries submitted by the people. As per claims by the officials in the Ministry, in case information asked for is not available immediately, the visitor is indicated the names of official/section concerned and the date by which the required information would be available. It is possible to ascertain the current status in such cases, even before the information becomes due. The supply of information, we were informed, was periodically monitored. In about 60% of the cases, information was provided immediately across the counter. Queries with reference to specific information are forwarded to the respective sections/divisions. However, these claims were not endorsed on our visit to the facility. Applications or grievances certainly cannot be tracked at the IFC. The IFC simply does a post office job of communicating the applications to the concerned sections.

It is noteworthy that within the organization, formal channels of progress for applications or requests for facilitation received at the IFC have not been clearly laid down. The authority lines in respect of specific issues have not been clearly specified to the Counter Incharge. Lack of specifications in this regard needs to be remedied for effective functioning of the IFC. Copies of departmental instructions and the work allocation chart are not communicated at the IFC. Downgrading of the IFC in the organizational scheme of things is quite obvious. In this regard, broad familiarity of the Counter Incharge is the only source of facilitation and information provision.

Absence of trained manpower is considered a major constraint at the IFC. There is a requirement to maintain computerized database and to upgrade the publicity effort regarding the IFC. The Contact Person at the IFC feels that the Counter Incharge should desirably be an Assistant, for “An Assistant has the knowledge of the functioning of the Ministry and can function as a Facilitation officer.” There is little effort to make use of the IFC experience of the Counter Incharge to improve it. Staff at this IFC has never been involved in any high level meetings/discussions concerning improvement of the IFC facility. More faith is put in getting a review of the functioning of the IFC by the outsiders rather than an review. External review of the facility is considered necessary to effect the desired improvements in the functioning of the IFC, as “it will help to get new ideas as to how to make the Facilitation Cell perform better”. For conducting external reviews, any agency nominated by the DoPT is considered suitable.

In view of waning functions at the IFC, the officers feel that they could consider delegating to the IFC some of the functions related to disputes at the offices of the Chief Labour Commissioner and Regional Labour Commissioners, and those concerning bonded labour, contract labour and the Welfare Division, if such a directive was received from the DARPG. However, there is a need to regularly obtain inputs and suggestions in this regard. Further discussions to articulate the requirements would be needed to make the IFC more meaningful and responsive to the concerns of labour.

IFC of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment

The IFC of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is located at Shastri Bhawan. Access to this IFC is relatively easier as it is situated on the front side of the building and can be seen across the road. However, the display board at the entrance declares it only as ‘Soochna Kendra’. As a result, all visitors who approach the Reception in the building are referred to it if they wish to seek any information. Even people at the reception are not fully informed about the purpose of the facility. This kind of confusion needs to be dispelled. Since the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs do not have their own IFCs, their visitors are also referred to

the IFC of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to get information or gain access to officers inside the security zone. That, of course, cannot be arranged there.

This IFC is an air-conditioned office. However, it gives the appearance of a storehouse rather than an information centre. Stockpiles of various kinds of papers pertaining to the Ministry were found dumped at this IFC. Seating arrangement for visitors is inadequate. Visitors to the IFC comprise a wide range of people. These include among others a good number of the physically challenged and the senior citizens, who wish to know about the facilities and schemes offered to them by the Ministry and how to avail these. This facility is frequently approached by the NGOs from all over India. Students from the economically weaker sections often visit the IFC to find out how scholarships could be attained, etc. Visitor's register, however, was not diligently maintained. The explanation offered was that many of the queries were handled informally and also over phone, as was the practice in other IFCs as well.

Public Grievances and RTI applications are received at the IFC. All RTI applications are diarized. Regarding work allocation at the IFC, the Counter Incharge felt that although the RTI work could be separated, PG should remain with the IFC as it is closely related to the facilitation work, which is the main mandate of the IFC. It was felt by some that having one Director, Public Grievances (DPG) in Ministry does not serve the purpose as one DPG is not in a position to understand all grievances related to different subject matters in a Ministry, which deals with diverse subjects- the need to have a PG officer for each division was underlined by the staff. A copy of the action taken report on grievances, it was suggested, should be made available at the IFC. No half-yearly reports are being sent even to the DARPG. Nor is any systematic analysis of grievances being done. Quarterly report prepared by the IFC is only on the number of PG and RTI applications received. It contains no other information related to the IFC. The Annual Report of the Ministry carries a section on the IFC. This Ministry has provided only limited information on the web site, which is also not regularly updated. Print material regarding schemes and services was not available when the IFC was visited. We were told, however, that it was being printed. RTI forms were available at the IFC.

No policy changes or changes in guidelines get communicated to the IFC in time. Requests have to be made repeatedly. Division heads do not cooperate in this regard. This is the disappointing observation of the Counter-Incharge. There is a computer with printer at the IFC, but it is not networked. There is no Intranet. Intra-organisational networking is carried out through telephone only. Tracking of grievances is possible through the CPGRAMS, which is operational at the IFC. RTI applications cannot be tracked.

The Counter Incharge of the IFC is a Section Officer. In addition, there is one UDC and two Assistants. The Counter Incharge expressed during the discussions that the Incharge at the IFC should be appointed on rotation basis from the heads of programme divisions. This would serve as an internship for them as they would come face to face with people's problems. As for training, people-friendly skills as well technical skills should be developed. About possible improvement of the IFC facility of a big Ministry like this, two prominent suggestions emerged from within: one, there should be subject specialist DPGs in organizations; and two, the Counter should be managed by heads of programme divisions on rotation basis. While these are useful suggestions in view of the tasks being undertaken by the IFC at present, it is important to explore the possible areas for information facilitation and the possibilities of making the IFC more responsive to the needs and concerns of the society. Creating mechanisms for obtaining suggestions regarding the responsibilities which can be undertaken by the IFC and for a systematic analysis of needs and concerns of the people, based on the suggestions obtained can be of relevance in this context. Decentralised IFCs in order to ensure dissemination is another area to be looked into to ensure that the concerns of social justice are effectively addressed.

IFC of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs

This facilitation counter is not easy to access as no direction indicators have been put up in Krishi Bhawan where it is located. The IFC accommodates the RTI desk of the Ministry of Rural Development along with it. It is housed in a large reception hall, which provides adequate seating arrangement for the visitors. There is no air-conditioning. A

computer with printer can be seen, though no photocopier or fax is available at the IFC. Telephonic enquiries are attended by the Counter Incharge.

NGOs, general consumers and research students come to avail of information and facilitation at the IFC, though the Counter Incharge conceded to the fact that not many members of the public are aware of the IFC and the services provided by it. The names of CPIOs/APIOs or Grievance officers have not been displayed at the IFC. Grievances are received at the IFC and can also be tracked online though only through National Consumer Help line. At this IFC, the status of grievances can be tracked by visitors online through the software provided by the National Consumer Help line. Grievances coming in through other channels cannot, however, be tracked here. There are multiple channels through which grievances are received, such as, through *corecentre.com* or through regional offices, by post, telephonically or through e-mail directly to senior officers. There is no networking of databases of these channels, and no touch screen kiosk. RTI applications could also not be tracked at the IFC. There is a separate RTI Cell. Applications are communicated to concerned section through the IFC. As far as National Consumer Help line is concerned, the Counter Incharge facilitates the visitors to register their grievances online. They have a docket number through which the status of grievances can be known. Monthly grievance analysis is carried out at this IFC.

Printed material on schemes and services as well as the forms required by the visitors were available at the IFC. Adequate copies of pamphlets etc. were available for dissemination at the IFC- these are distributed free of cost to the visitors on request. Copies of the Information Handbook brought out by the Ministry under the RTI Act, 2005, however, were not available. Copies of departmental instructions are not communicated to the IFC though the work allocation chart is available.

There is a lack of intra-organisational networking through databases at the IFC. The IFC needs to be developed as a single window for enquiries and adequately networked to gain access to all levels as and when required and then publicized adequately. The CPGRAMS is not operational at the IFC. Nothing can be known about grievances coming in from other sources, that is, other than the National Consumer help line at the IFC. The Counter Incharge feels that the RTI Cell should not be merged with

the IFC, as the work of facilitation is distinct in itself. Merging would require better infrastructure. Currently, space is quite a constrained.

The Counter Incharge of this IFC belongs to an NGO- the National Consumer Help Line. A person is sent to serve as the Counter Incharge for a period of three to four months through an arrangement with the University of Delhi. The Incharge undergoes a short-term training at the time of appointment. The designation of the Counter Incharge is Counselor. The present Counselor, however, has been retained for over a year. The chief drawback in having temporary appointees is that by the time they get familiarized with the work being done at various levels in the Ministry, they are called back. There is no support staff provided at the IFC. The Counter Incharge manages the IFC all by herself.

Presently, on receiving a grievance, the Ministry forwards it to the concerned organisation and pursues the matter with the latter. Though the Ministry cannot statutorily bring them to book regarding omissions/commissions on their part, it uses persuasion/reminders to make them attend to it. In the changed dispensation of Ministries as a result of increasing trend towards liberalization, whereby, private service providers have become the direct service providers, the IFCs can assume a significant role in enabling the Ministry to perform the watchdog function in a more effective manner. It can also facilitate the citizens to perform that role by providing the necessary inputs and information in a proactive manner.

IFC of the Ministry of Rural Development

This IFC of the Ministry of Rural Development is situated at Krishi Bhawan. As mentioned above, it shares space with the Ministry of Consumer Affairs. Both the IFCs are located in the same room. The IFC is not air-conditioned and lacks space for visitors to sit. There is no photocopier, or fax, no Intranet facility at the IFC of the Ministry of Rural Development. It was noticed during the visit to the IFC that even the RTI application form, which was requested by a user, could not be downloaded. It was also not available in hard copy form.

Visitors, though very few, are usually from the media and other civil society organizations and come to submit RTI applications or inquire about whom to meet in connection with some specific service. An average of ten to twelve persons per day approach the IEC division of the Ministry to get guidelines on schemes and services, which are not available at the IFC. The IFC, in effect, is only an RTI desk. Facilitation is carried out only to the extent that the addresses of all offices of the Ministry along with contacts are available at the desk. Visitors who wish to be facilitated are provided the contacts of officers for desired access. Print information on schemes and services is not available at the IFC. No forms required by the visitors have been kept at the IFC. Individual queries could also not be tracked at the IFC.

The IFC has no access to levels within the Ministry, the attached, subordinate and field offices. There is no NICNET at this IFC. Copies of departmental instructions are not communicated though a work allocation chart is made available. No report is prepared on the IFC. The IFC also does not find a mention in the Annual Report of the Ministry. The CPGRAMS or local PGRAMS is not functional at the IFC. This IFC is a one-person Counter. Discussions with senior officers in the Ministry pointed towards the need for facilitation. A sufficiently senior officer, supported by a staff of two to three persons, who must be computer savvy, it was felt, should be posted at the IFC to carry out the work expected at the IFC. The officer should have direct access to all levels within the organization. The chief constraint in the Ministry is manpower shortage due to which facilitation work has not been expanded.

The Ministry of Rural Development has still not adopted a Citizen's Charter. This despite the fact that some officials at the Ministry felt convinced about its urgency. In view of the wide reach of the activities of the Ministry, both the IFC and the Charter are needed not just at the level of the Ministry but also at the level of all attached/subordinate and field offices which are engaged in service delivery. These are particularly needed at the level of DRDAs in all states, as the chief bottleneck in the implementation of schemes is lack of accountability of BDOs and functionaries at the block level, especially with regard to selection of beneficiaries and the financial transactions. IFCs at the local levels can play an important role in making service delivery better.

IFC of the Ministry of Environment and Forests

The IFC of the Ministry of Environment and Forests is located on the ground floor of Paryavaran Bhawan at the CGO complex, Lodhi Road. However, being at a significant distance from the main gate, it is not easy to reach. The entrance of the IFC displays the mandate of the Ministry of Environment and Forests. It would help further if the entrance displayed the mandate of the IFC in specific terms. Important contacts could also be mentioned.

The IFC is well-equipped air conditioned facility, with a reception desk, enough physical space for visitors, a cabin that stores print material and publications regarding schemes and services. It has an information kiosk with touch screen facility. However, the information kiosk could not be opened because no one around had the password. On the second visit, it was possible to do so but only to discover that no data has been fed into it. It simply has an Internet connection and the Ministry's web site could be accessed on it. This hardly serves the purpose. In July 2005, a meeting was called by Joint Secretary regarding upgradation of the IFC and the IFC staff was invited to the meeting to discuss the renovation facilities, space, infrastructure etc. As an outcome of this meeting, touch screen, Internet facility, attractive infrastructure etc. was provided. Additional computers, hardware and software support and regular updating of information are considered important by the staff for the purpose of making IFCs effective.

Several NGOs come to the IFC to inquire about the Ministry's funding schemes and guidelines for NGOs, about Environment Impact Assessments (EIA), Annual Reports and publications of the Ministry and other subordinate bodies/offices etc. The Contact person informed that approximately hundred visitors approached the facility every week. However, not many visitors could be seen when the IFC was visited. The IFC provides general information about the Ministry and its functions, divisions, contacts etc. Visitors are facilitated to meet the concerned officers. No specialized teams are available at the IFC to handle queries/requests concerning specific subject areas pertaining to the various divisions. Information available on the computer, we were informed, was updated.

However, there is no system of updating information online for individual queries submitted by users. A copy of the RTI Act was available at the IFC but copies of the Information Handbook brought out by the Ministry under the RTI Act, 2005 were not available. The Citizen's Charter was not available in hard copy. The Counter Incharge was not even aware of the Citizen's Charter of the Ministry.

This IFC is an outsourced facility. It is run by the Center for Environment Education. This arrangement has its limitations, for the copies of departmental instructions are not communicated to the IFC. There are other information constraints as well. Mandate of the IFC and how to enhance it as per user requirements has never been paid the desired attention. The Counter Incharge is not an active participant in the exercise. Internal reviews of the functioning of the IFC, though not taken up till now, are proposed to be conducted soon. External review of the IFC is favoured by the Contact Officer to provide a neutral third party perspective and help explore the possible ways of improvement. Preferably, a professional agency that understands the concept of public information, visitor servicing, front office operations etc. should carry out external reviews. No publicity has been given to the IFC through the media though information regarding the IFC is included in the Annual Report and details of the IFC are available in the Citizen's Charter. The website of the Ministry fails to even mention the IFC.

The Contact person is the Division Head. The Counter Incharge, though courteous, seemed quite ignorant of the various schemes and services of the Ministry and did not seem to carry much understanding of the various divisions in the organization and the Citizen's Charter of the Ministry. At best, she could put one across to people inside the security zone. Though no support staff was found during the visit to the facility, a written response to the questionnaire revealed that there is a project coordinator, a project officer, a project assistant, and a peon/office boy at the IFC. Considering the nature and quality of work, which needs to be carried out at the IFC, a middle level officer who has a reasonable level of knowledge about the policies/processes, working, strengths and weaknesses of these and is capable of accessing officials of the Ministry easily with some decision making power is desirable for the job.

In view of the increased connectivity that would be inevitable for the effectiveness and relevance of the IFC facility, technical training to the staff not only at the IFC but in the organization too would be required. No technical training has been provided to the IFC staff so far. This is considered important to handle the improved connectivity, which is expected in the coming years. The Counter Incharge presently does not have access to all the levels within the organization and across affiliate organisations on a continuous basis to gather required information. A useful suggestion received in this regard from the officer concerned was that “there must be one designated ‘Nodal Officer’ in each division to provide a regular point between the IFC and the concerned division regarding the latest information status, guidelines etc. in terms of particular section, division or field.”

Lack of manpower and resources is considered an important constraint in the effective functioning of the IFC. High mobility of officers and frequent change in the allocation of work is also considered problematic. Delay in providing the latest information to the IFC is also considered a major problem area. Regular provision of news and events to the IFC should be ensured. Information provided to the IFC should be regularly updated. In view of the relevance of decisions of the other Ministries to the mandate of this Ministry, it is important that inter-organisational networking and information sharing is effective.

IFC of the Ministry of Railways

The IFC of the Ministry of Railways is situated on the front side at the Rail Bhawan facing Rafi Marg. Access to the IFC is not a problem. It is an air-conditioned office. A partition within the IFC separates the RTI room from the facilitation counter. The staff considers the IFC and RTI as distinct functions, and would like two separate boards to be put up on the wall facing the road, declaring these two as distinct facilities, not perceived as merged, though housed within the same chamber. The display board simply puts up Central Public Information Unit, conveying confusing message to the bystander who mistake it as a general information facility and not as a facilitation facility specific to the Ministry of Railways. Computers with printers have been provided only

for the RTI work. There is a photocopier, though it is quite old. The staff was desperate to get a new photocopier. There is no fax facility at the IFC. As for connectivity, both Internet and Intranet or Railnet are available at the IFC. This Ministry plans to put RTI and PG online. The process is already underway.

Visitors come to the IFC to seek information regarding concessions available under various schemes and also regarding how to file an RTI application, besides miscellaneous guidance, as for instance, about exams conducted for recruitment by the Ministry of Railways or about the procedure for filing a complaint or obtaining a specific service benefit. Mainly, RTI applications are received at this facility. Public Grievances are received directly in the PG Cell. They are facilitated in required respects. However, there are serious shortfalls regarding facilitation expected of the IFC. Printed material on schemes and services was not available at the IFC. Forms were also not available. The Citizen's Charter of the Ministry too was not displayed anywhere in the IFC; nor was it available in hard copy form.

Copies of departmental instructions are not communicated to the IFC though the work allocation chart is prepared and communicated by the O& M section. The IFC needs to be developed considerably to fulfill the mandate assigned to the IFC. Staff requirements were conveyed quite clearly by the staff at the IFC. This IFC has to handle coordination work across fifty directorates, fifty PSUs, seventy divisions in sixteen zonal railways. Additional computers, trained manpower to handle these and adequate space were considered desirable. The need for maintaining proper information database is undoubtedly the most important requisite for the effective functioning of the IFC. A significant suggestion from the IFC staff was that all Orders concerning new announcements and new policies, should be uploaded on the web site. Report on the IFC is prepared every six months. A chapter on the IFC is also included in the Annual Report of the Ministry. There is, however, a greater need for publicity through the media as well as campaigns at and around the railway stations across the country.

The IFC is grossly understaffed and ill equipped considering the magnitude of work it has to handle. The Counter Incharge is Deputy Director cum Facilitation Incharge cum APIO. Other staff at the IFC is dedicated only to RTI. Presently, the Counter

Incharge has no staff support for facilitation. The Contact Officer felt that there should be at least two SOs, not LDCs, well conversant with the work of the Ministry with a minimum of ten to fifteen years of experience. In addition, one LDC was also considered necessary. Training for computer proficiency and ability to handle large databases, which need to be maintained at the IFC, was considered important.

Regarding utility of the IFC in the present scenario when all information is on the web site, officers of the Ministry of Railways endorsed the requirement of the IFC since there are many information gaps, which need to be addressed by the Ministry through the IFCs. Service users too expressed similar interest. There is a general lack of awareness among people about rules and regulations regarding matters such as e-tickets, refunds, reservation slips etc. In respect of these and many other areas, facilitation is needed, as citizen harassment is commonplace due to ignorance.

For an effective implementation of policies and programmes, right information should be provided to the people and the IFC is the appropriate agency for that. The Ministry should consider setting up facilitation counters at the railway stations also, which can be easily accessed by the passengers who need to obtain various kinds of information in order to derive the benefits of service. Facilitation regarding government schemes and projects and grievances etc. needs to be offered all across the country and is mandatory for demand driven service delivery.

IFC of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

Access to the IFC of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is easy, as it is situated in the front row at Shastri Bhawan. It is an air-conditioned office with adequate seats for visitors and drinking water facility. There is a computer with printer and a photocopier. Internet connection is available though there is no NICNET. The IFC does have adequate chairs for visitors and no toilet facility is there.

This IFC does not receive many visitors. A visitor's register, kept at the IFC, testifies to that. Most visitors come to put in RTI applications or grievances. RTI applications and public grievances are received and forwarded to the concerned sections.

Telephonic enquiries are attended. Forms are available. As per the Counter Incharge, follow up of RTI applications is done through proactive communication with the clients. Public grievances are also received at the IFC. Since the PGRAMS is functional at the IFC, grievances can be tracked. However, PGRAMS is not being used presently because of staff constraint. In any case not many grievances are being received at the IFC. Although some print material about schemes etc. is available at the IFC, dissemination of print material regarding specific subjects is carried out through fifteen different outlets, such as, the NGO division, Chandralok building for AIDS, etc. There is not much public awareness in this respect. It is strongly felt that there should be IFCs at the level of the fifteen outlets that are providing the information.

The Counter Incharge feels quite strongly that database of attached and subordinate offices can be made available at the IFC only if senior officers take a decision in this respect and provide the passwords at the IFC. Copies of departmental instructions and the work allocation chart are not communicated to the IFC. Half yearly report is prepared and information on the IFC is included in the Annual Report of the Ministry. Counter Incharge is an SO who manages the Counter all by himself without any support staff. The need for computer-trained staff at the IFC to use the newly developed software such as the CPGRAMS is felt strongly. Monitoring of information and facilitation at the IFCs/Reception counters is not being done at the IFC. There is a communication gap here that needs to be plugged. Systematic analysis of facilitation needs as well as facilitation exercise carried out at the IFC and the constraints experienced need to be examined. Discussion with service users as well as officials pointed towards the need to establish effective networking for information flow. The possibilities for this need to be explored for making IFC effective and relevant.

IFC of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports and Ministry of Culture

Tucked away, as it is towards the backside of the Shastri Bhawan, in the absence of any direction indicators, it is quite difficult to locate this IFC. The IFC is clogged for space. There is poor ventilation though air-conditioner has been

provided. It is particularly hard to sit there during summers. There is no space for visitors to sit or even stand to wait for their turn. As in case of several other IFCs, there is no drinking water or toilet facility. The IFC does have a computer with printer, a telephone but no photocopier, which is badly needed, according to the Counter Incharge. The IFC has no touch screen facility either.

Visitors are mainly staff of various prominent organisations under the Ministry of HRD, such as, Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan, India Council of Historical Research etc. who come to deposit RTI applications or to enquire about schemes and forms. Students also come to inquire about scholarships. Surprisingly, although the signboard put up outside the IFC mentions three Ministries, the IFC caters to only HRD and not the other two Ministries as declared. Even within HRD, it caters only to higher education, not elementary education and school literacy. Facilitation provided is miniscule. It has been reduced now to being merely an RTI desk for higher education for the Ministry of HRD. RTI applications are being received at the Counter only for the Ministry of HRD, not for other Ministries. Names of CPIOs/APIOs, Grievance officers of the three Ministries are not displayed. The Citizen's Charter was not displayed when visited; nor was it available in hard copy form for any of the three Ministries. A Section Officer is the Counter Incharge and there is a UDC who receives the RTI applications. Grievances are also received at the Counter. However, the status of RTI applications and grievances cannot be tracked at the IFC. The CPGRAMS or any local PGRAMS is not operational at the IFC.

Although some forms, which were required for various procedures, were available at the IFC, information about the latest schemes and services was not available in print. Some of the very old copies could be seen tucked in an old cupboard, which has probably not been touched for years, lying at a corner. Copies of the Information Handbook brought out by the Ministry under the RTI Act, 2005 were not available either. As was revealed during discussions with the Counter Incharge, the web site is not updated regularly. That makes it very difficult for the staff to satisfy the queries of visitors. No database related to the queries of visitors has been maintained. It does not seem that the Ministry has ever made a serious attempt to articulate user requirements and organize

database accordingly. No systematic exercises at the identification of prospective users/possible queries have been made.

It is important to identify the areas of interest for the service users, which they need information and information should be compiled and disseminated in a simple and communicative style. During the visit to the IFC, a visitor inquired about a scholarship for young artists for which he had applied; he was, instead, asked to go to the scholarship division opposite Bhartiya Vidya Bhawan. Another visitor who was there to seek information about the rules of affiliation of private schools underlined the need for a thorough orientation of the staff with regard to information requirements of users and also a more courteous behavior towards people who came to seek information. A systematic analysis of the demand pattern as well as the possible ways of addressing these can be helpful.

Copies of the departmental instructions are not communicated at the IFC. Though Internet has been provided, no NICNET is functional at the IFC. Intra-organizational networking is through telephone, not through computer database. The attached/subordinate/field offices of the three Ministries cannot be accessed at the IFC. This is the single major constraint in developing this IFC as a single window for clients/stakeholders/users of this organization. Report on the IFC is prepared on a half yearly basis. A chapter on the IFC is also included in the Annual Report of the Ministry of HRD though not of the Ministries of Youth Affairs and Sports and Culture remain inactive at the IFC.

The issue of training and the subject matter of proposed training programmes were discussed with the Counter Incharge. It was opined that more than training, experience matters for effective working at the IFC. Hence, there is no need for specialized training for staff. In this IFC, work allocation chart for officers/divisions inside the Ministries is available for right referrals.

There is a strongly felt need for proactive information dissemination regarding schemes and services at all relevant levels, including the district level. Presently, many of the schemes lie unutilized for lack of demand on the part of target group. There is a need to develop procedure for dissemination of information regarding these. In many cases,

NGOs have been entrusted the responsibility to disseminate the same to people in blocks and villages. However, the IFC could be involved in developing procedures for dissemination across the country.

The Ministry of Culture is a large organization with three attached offices, six subordinate offices, twenty-six autonomous bodies, one council and four classified 'other' organisations. There are information needs, which should be addressed by the IFC. However, there is little support available here except for the board displaying this IFC, which actually caters only to HRD, which mentions it as an IFC of the Ministry of Culture as well.

The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports has ten autonomous organisations within it and two classified 'Others'. Though useful information has been put on the web site, facilitation is still needed because websites are not interactive in nature. There are queries related to the information put on the web site, which need to be handled by facilitators. There are scholarships and exams etc. regarding which information needs to be tracked at the IFC since for a user this is a single window. If he is still referred to offices across Delhi, the purpose of having an IFC is defeated. It is much more practicable to have databases networked and passwords provided at the IFC for the IFC to function as a single window. Same observation applies for higher education, secondary education, elementary education and literacy. Setting up a Public Information Unit needs be taken up for active consideration. Feedback regarding the progress of programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan should be received at the IFC for purposes of improvement.

IFC of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting

The IFC of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting is located on the ground floor of Shastri Bhawan, towards the backside of the building. Though there is a direction indicator at the far left of the building at the front side of Shastri Bhawan, it is too inconspicuous, making access to the IFC quite difficult for a first time visitor. Names of officers concerning RTI and PG are displayed at the IFC. The facility is air-conditioned, had a computer with printer and photocopying facility available. Though no fax machine

had been provided, telephonic access is possible. No touch-screen facility is available at the IFC. There is no drinking water or toilet facility at the IFC. For drinking water one has to go to the first floor. An estimated ten to fifteen visitors come to the IFC every day from private channels, NGOs and the public at large to know about the various schemes, for consultations and for clarifications regarding information that has been put on the web site. Seating capacity of the IFC is rather limited in that not more than two persons could find a place at a time. Visitor's register was not being maintained. The explanation offered was that many of the inquiries were tackled informally and telephonic enquiries are also entertained and replied to.

The main work being carried out at the IFC is regarding RTI. The Grievance Cell is separate. Grievances by post can be sent directly to the Receipt and Dispatch section. The CPGRAMS is not operational at the IFC. It is not possible to track the status of RTI applications or grievances put in. Other miscellaneous tasks being carried out at the IFC include issuing receipts, forwarding letters, reminders, collecting charges for RTI applications, coordinating with the CPIO, the policy and planning section and the O and M section based on user requirements and the requirements felt at the IFC. No record of complaints and suggestions and the action taken on these was available.

Internal networking is still in the process of being developed. The Counter Incharge does not have easy access to all levels within the organization and attached/subordinate organisations on a continuous basis to gather required information. The IFC is still not connected with various organisations through the Internet. There is no Intranet to connect databases of all attached and subordinate offices as well as field formations of the Ministry. The Section Officer informed that the Ministry's website is conveyed to the visitors, if they requested for facilitation in any respect and she was confident that the information, which the visitors asked for was available at the website. This did not appear to be correct as a visitor keen to know the fate of his application would not get the information from the Ministry's website.

The Annual Report, the RTI manual and the Citizen's Charter were available in print form at the IFC. Other schemes and booklets were not available. Copies of the Information Handbook of the Ministry brought out under the RTI Act, 2005 were

downloaded from the Ministry's web site if the visitors asked for the same. Even other forms could be downloaded from the web site. All forms were not available in hard copy form at the IFC. The Information Handbook is priced Rs 1000/-, a price too high. But no price was charged by the IFC while handing over to a visitor a copy of the Information Handbook downloaded from the Ministry's website.

Copies of departmental instructions are communicated to the IFC, though the work allocation chart, which was available with them, was a year old. Both of these are crucial for facilitation by the IFC. The quarterly and monthly reports prepared at the IFC are only about RTI applications. No other aspect of the IFC's working is included. The IFC has not been publicized through the media. The Ministry has posted a Section Officer in the IFC who is assisted by two UDCs. Training workshops should be organized taking into account the inputs received from interactions with the public about the work being done and the requirements articulated by the public.

Though the IFC facilitates access to the policy planning division, not many requests are being received for access to it. The Citizen's Charter of the Ministry needs to be publicized and distributed among stakeholders from the media and those in the government sector to energise the dormant potential of the IFC.

IFC of the Ministry of Civil Aviation

The address of this IFC was downloaded from the site of *corecentre.htm*. On reaching the place, it was learnt that the IFC had been closed down. Discussion with the officers of the Ministry revealed that the organization could not spare staff for the facility and therefore closed it down. We were told that it was again being considered and suitable location was being searched for the purpose. Although no sense of loss was conveyed by the officials on account of the non-existence of the IFC, from the viewpoint of the citizens, an opportunity to seek information from the organization was already lost.

IFC of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs

This IFC is situated at Shastri Bhawan. Access to the IFC of this Ministry is not difficult as it is situated on the front side of the building. There are two desks at the IFC. Near the entrance is the dak desk where miscellaneous post pertaining to the Ministry is received. Towards the far end is the seat of the Counter Incharge. As far as the physical condition of the IFC goes, this IFC is badly in need of upkeep. It is unclean to the extent that spider webs can be seen! There is no drinking water or toilet facility. No names of RTI or PG officials or the Citizen's Charter have been displayed anywhere in the IFC. There is a computer with printer though it is not connected with the computers of division heads sitting inside the security zone. The IFC does not have a photocopier. There is no fax, though telephonic access is possible. Touch screen kiosks are available at company level though one is not available at the IFC.

No visitors were found during the first four visits made to this IFC. Two visitors were found during the fifth visit, sitting helplessly as there was no one to attend to them. The IFC receives the applications submitted under the RTI Act, 2005. Both RTI applications and public grievances are received at the Counter. Public Grievances received at the IFC are referred to the concerned section. CPGRAMS or local PGRAMS is not operational at the IFC. It is not possible to track the status of RTI applications or grievances online. Printed material on schemes and services was not available though forms required by the visitors were available. Individual queries cannot be tracked through computer database.

There is Internet but no NICNET, connecting the IFC with other sections in the organisation. Intra-organisational networking is informal, through telephone only. Attached and subordinate offices of the Ministry are not connected through computer database. Copies of departmental instructions are not communicated to the IFC. An old copy of the work allocation chart (July 2001) prepared by the O&M section was available at the IFC. Needless to say, an updated copy should be regularly provided. The IFC has not been adequately publicized. A half yearly report on the IFC is prepared. However, there is no mention of the IFC in the Annual Report of the Ministry. The Counter Incharge, a Senior Technical Assistant, could be met only during the fifth visit. Of the

five visits to this IFC, on two occasions when the Counter Incharge was on leave, no one was there to attend to visitors except the peon. One of the visitors told us that the dak clerk was often found sleeping on the sofa during the working hours, as there were hardly any visitors to attend. A peon of the Ministry who happened to be at the IFC for some work during one of the visits, informed to our disbelief that the IFC had three been assigned one Assistant and two UDCs.

The mandate of this IFC needs to be rediscovered completely for it to be of any real use to the visitors. The cobweb ridden IFC of the Ministry of Company Affairs is baffling in its present state. There is a need to put it in shape and make it relevant.

IFC of the Ministry of Textiles

The IFC of the Ministry of Textiles is located alongside the IFC of Ministry of Steel in Udyog Bhawan. Access to this IFC is quite difficult. There are no direction indicators any where in the building. A shabby curtain divides the room into two sections, one of which is used by the driver to rest. There is no photocopier in this IFC. There is no AC. The IFC is far from being well maintained. Ministry of Textiles however, has now been allotted a separate space for the IFC and it is likely to shift to its new location. One can look forward to improvement in this regard.

Several NGOs, we were informed, visited the IFC to obtain information regarding various schemes and their project proposals. On an average twenty-five to thirty visitors are received at this IFC every month. Grievances received at the IFC are not too many. As per the Half Yearly Report on the IFC for the period ending 31.12.07, 460 queries/grievances were received at the IFC, out of which 156 were received in person and 304 telephonically. All 460 cases were solved at the Facilitation Counter itself. Grievances are received at the Counter. Suggestion box has been kept outside the IFC to receive feedback. However, that is used by postmen to drop in the mail for all Ministries. There is no designated place to drop in the mail in Udyog Bhawan.

Important information related to the Textile Ministry is fed into the computer. Annual Reports, Handlooms/Handicrafts Compendium, TUF scheme, wool, jute, silk

sector books, and materials related to other schemes run by the Ministry were available. Information about the Textile Policy of Government of India was not available in this IFC. Adequate information about handlooms, handicrafts and the state of the weavers was also not available. Copies of the Information Handbook brought out by the Ministry under the RTI Act, 2005 were also not available at the IFC.

Intra-organisational networking with attached/subordinate and field offices through the Intranet is not available at the IFC. Copies of departmental instructions and the work allocation chart are not regularly communicated to it. RTI applications and Public Grievances could not be tracked at the IFC. The CPGRAMS is not operational here. Information on the IFC has not been put in the Citizen's Charter though it is included in the Annual Report of the organization. No other proactive means have been adopted to publicize the IFC facility. The Counter Incharge, an Assistant, has been provided with one Chowkidar to assist him with daily errands. This is far from being adequate for a prominent Ministry like the Ministry of Textiles if it has to play a significant role in the process. Computer proficient and well trained staff which can address the facilitation needs of all stakeholders of the Ministry is needed at the IFC. The Counter Incharge was not very appreciative of the RTI and its positive effects. There is a need for orientation of staff also.

The mandate of the IFC needs to be rediscovered involving the stakeholders, which would include besides the poor weavers and artisans across the country, the numerous civil society groups working for them. Information needs should be proactively identified and procedure for local dissemination of information with reporting mechanism with the IFC at Delhi may be worked out. The Citizen's Charter needs to specify authorities for different jurisdictions and be promoted actively for use by the service seekers of the Ministry.

IFC of the Ministry of Coal and the Ministry of Mines

The Ministry of Coal and Mines has long been bifurcated, yet the two Ministries continue to maintain their IFCs within the same physical space on the ground floor of Shastri Bhawan. Access to the IFC is rather simple as it is visible from across the road.

However, merely declaring it as an information facility confuses the average bystander. The purpose it serves and the Ministry it caters to are not communicated clearly through the display board, which needs to be put up at the entrance. Whether it caters to all attached/subordinate offices of the Ministry or only some of these should also be clearly mentioned on the display board. As one enters the IFC, which is an air-conditioned office, there are two desks- one belongs to the Ministry of Mines and the other to the Ministry of Coal and both the Counter Incharges hold the position of Assistants. This only reflects the lack of attention paid to the IFC in the organisational set up by the two Ministries respectively. Often, one finds only one of the two is available at the Counter. Both the IFCs had a computer with printer though no photocopier or fax. The computer, however, was not connected with the computers of the division heads inside the security zone. The Citizen's Charter was also not available in hard copy form.

The Counter Incharge for the Ministry of Mines informed that visitors often came to file revision cases against specific state government decisions regarding illegal mining, concerning major minerals. As per half yearly return on the functioning of the IFC of the Ministry of Mines for the period ending December 2007, a total number of 345 queries/grievances were received. Out of these, 343 were received in person and 2 telephonically or by e-mail. 155 cases were solved across the counter. Acknowledgment slips were issued in the remaining 190 cases and the final response was given later. A visitor's register is not being maintained at the IFC. Many visitors, we were told, were attended informally regarding which there was no record. For minor minerals, cases are sorted out at the State level.

Ministry of Coal only gets about five to six visitors during the week, who generally come either for the Annual Report of the Ministry or to submit application under the RTI. Occasionally, the visitors seek some general information related to the Ministry too. In case, queries of people cannot be settled across the Counter, visitors are referred to the concerned officers. Subsequently, they have to pursue the case themselves. No time frame for providing information is mentioned in the acknowledgement slip. RTI applications are received at the Counter. Queries are also sorted out over phone. The PG Cell of the Ministry of Mines is separate. Grievances are received at the IFC and referred to the PG Cell. Status of the RTI applications and Grievances received at the counter

cannot be tracked at the IFC. The CPGRAMS of the DARPG or local PGRAMS is not operational at the IFC. The IFC of the Ministry of Coal also primarily takes in RTI applications and Public Grievances. The staff feels that in case the IFC were shut down, it would create serious difficulty for the users. Though not functioning at its ideal best, it is still needed.

As per the web site of the Ministry of Mines, presently information on subjects like organisational set up of the Ministry, subordinate organisations, public sector undertakings, policies and guidelines, Acts, Orders and Amendments, definition of terms, statistics etc. are being disseminated at the IFC. However, on visit, it was found that the Ministry of Mines only receives Revision Orders and RTI applications. It is not involved in the aforesaid tasks. As per claims by the Ministry in its web site, the system at the IFC generates useful statistics like the number of enquiries or grievances handled by the Facilitation Counter staff, and the total number of such cases received by the Ministry. It also generates a report on all types of queries pending in the Ministry at various stages. Detailed summary of cases disposed, pending, under process in respect of each dealing officer can be generated. These prints are sent on a weekly basis to the concerned officer for review and updating on periodic basis.

The web site of the Ministry of Coal claims that besides continuously striving towards improvement in safety standards for the employees and encouragement for workers' participation in the decision-making process, the Ministry also undertakes social responsibility to support local commitments through reinstating local population affected due to coalfield subsidence and fire and providing them support through employment, monetary assistance, self-employment schemes either in isolation or in combination. It further claims to provide all relevant information regarding the coal and lignite industry to the interested citizen through periodic publication of Coal Directory, Provisional Coal Statistics etc. However, these assertions were not endorsed during the visit. No information regarding the aforesaid was made available at the IFC when it was visited. There is no database with regard to either. Priced publications are available, which hardly make up for the lack of database at the IFC.

Priced publications of the Ministry of Mines are also available at the IFC. Prices vary with the publication, of course -some of these like the Mineral Yearbook, are priced as high as Rs. 2600. Annual Report of the Ministry is available free of cost. There were copies of booklets on various non-coal minerals and it was clear during the visits that the Assistant from the Ministry of Mines who attended the visitors seeking information on matters related to her Ministry was better equipped to respond than that from the Ministry of Coal could do. Copies of the Information Handbooks of Ministry of Mines and of the Ministry of Coal brought out under the RTI Act, 2005 in the format prescribed by the Department of Personnel were not available in the IFC. The Assistant was not able to confirm whether these could be downloaded from the respective web sites of the Ministry of Mines and that of the Ministry of Coal, if the visitors asked for the same.

Discussion with the Counter Incharge of the Ministry of Mines on the position of the IFC in the organisational scheme of things suggested the problems being faced and the future prospects of the IFC facility. Apparently, over the years, the IFC has been degraded in the organisational scheme of things. Previously, the IFC reported to the Joint Secretary. Now it reports to the Deputy Secretary. This virtually amounts to a de-emphasizing of the office. Administratively, the office functions under the Under Secretary. The designation of the Counter Incharge is Assistant. There is no support staff. Senior officers from the Ministry of Mines, we were told, paid surprise visits monthly/weekly to inquire about problems and look at the facilities in general. No evidence to this effect was, however, made available.

Copies of departmental instructions are not communicated at the IFC. The work allocation chart is available at the IFC of the Ministry of Mines but not at the IFC of the Ministry of Coal. As for connectivity at the IFC, the Ministry of Mines claims that it has been provided the required networking through the NIC's web site and Sarkaritel.com. Ministry of Coal too asserts that the general information as is required can be accessed at these sites. Further, it is asserted that it is possible to access other organizations over phone. However, there is no Intranet, which connects databases of attached/subordinate and field offices centrally at the IFCs of either the Ministry of Mines or the Ministry of Coal. No attempt has been made to publicize the facilities. No information about the IFCs

is included in the Annual Report. The Citizen's Charters are not displayed in the IFCs. Nor are they available in hard copy. A copy of the RTI Act is kept.

Since there is a shortage of staff in the Ministries, no additional staff is deployed at the IFCs, which is seen as a less important area. Required technical training to the Counter Incharges at the IFC of the two Ministries is provided by the NIC. Considering the limited nature of work presently being carried out at the IFC, it is not surprising that the Contact Person for the IFC felt that an Assistant would suffice for the job at the IFC. Senior officers, it was pointed out, carry out mandatory checks/internal review exercises occasionally, which is limited to checking facilities or conducting routine enquiries about difficulties being faced at the IFC. It was not possible to ascertain the claim, as no reports to that effect were made available to us.

There is no effort to proactively identify the information needs of the people and address them through the IFCs. There is no database available as such regarding mineral reserves, state-wise or district-wise, in the IFC of either the Ministry of Mines or the Ministry of Coal, which would be of use to the visitors. In the absence of database, one could not recommend that an information touch screen kiosk be made available at the IFC. The Counter Incharge of the IFC of the Ministry of Mines was quite categorical in asserting the need for IFCs at state level, where people have to confront difficult bureaucratic processes, once clearance is received from the Ministry. These should be networked with the IFC at Delhi through a reporting process.

IFC of the Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers

Situated on the front side of Shastri Bhawan, this IFC can be seen from across the road. It is easy to access. A visit to the IFC revealed that this IFC is reasonably equipped. Though constrained for space, it appears to be a comfortable air-conditioned facility with two desks- one belongs to the Department of Chemicals and Petrochemicals and the other to the Department of Fertilizers. There are computers with printers at both the desks. This IFC also has a photocopier. Fax facility is not available. Telephonic enquiries are attended. No visitor was found during our visits. Staff of various organizations under the Ministry came to submit RTI applications regarding staff matters.

We were not informed of any NGOs visiting the office ever for any information on any of the subjects dealt with by the Ministry.

As per claims on the website of the Department of Fertilizers, “in pursuance of the Government's commitment to bring greater transparency in administration through better access to information, Department of Fertilizers, Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers has established a NICNET based Information and Facilitation Centre at Shastri Bhawan with the objective of helping seekers of information from various segments of the society, fertilizer industry, members of Parliament, economists, consultants, scientists, dealers/distributors, media, farmers and the general public who are interested to get information on fertilizers. The Facilitation Centre also acts as a single window for acceptance of application under the Right to Information Act, 2005 and handing over replies, if so requested by the applicant. The IFC, claims the web-site of the Ministry, guides and provides information through printed materials and computer print-outs which covers information on fertilizer production, import of fertilizers, distribution and consumption of fertilizers, price and subsidy, technology and safety, environment, bio-fertilizers and other information related to agriculture. In order to help users get current information on production, imports, availability and sale of fertilizers, computer printouts are available. However, when visited, it was found that no such information dissemination was actually being carried out.

No grievances are presently being received in the IFCs. People who come in with grievances are referred to the Joint Secretary in respective Departments. The Counter Incharge of the IFC of Chemicals and Petrochemicals informed that forms were available in the Concession Wing or in the PSUs, which function under the Ministry. The CPGRAMS, or even the local PGRAMS, is not operational at the IFC. Presently, the RTI applications and grievances cannot be tracked at the IFC. If information called for by a user is not available immediately, it is possible to ascertain its status from the Grievance Cell of the Department. Though there is no proactive effort to take in suggestions or identify bottlenecks experienced by clients and stakeholders at PSUs, a suggestion drop box facility has been provided at the IFC, which, as we were told, is opened on a weekly basis. This is a rather passive approach. Though stack of newspapers were seen during

the visit, the task of picking up grievances from newspapers is not being performed in any of the two IFCs.

The IFCs are simply RTI desks. These did not have much information for the public. Print material was not available when the IFCs were visited. However, the Counter Incharges stated that in case a user requested for some information in print, attempt was made to contact the relevant sections for the purpose. Information availability from the organisations within the Ministry was also lacking. Contrary to claims it does not guide and provide information through printed materials and computer print outs on the wide range of subjects mentioned above. There is no print material available except the Annual Report or the database on the Computer. There is no database available for information facilitation regarding fertilizers, for instance, at the IFC of the Department of Fertilizers. RTI applications cannot be tracked at the IFC, contrary to the claims made by the web site of the Ministry. The IFC currently is not made much use of by the farmer.

Details of the IFC have been provided on the web site and in the Citizen's Charter of the organization. Contrary to the claims made on the web site of the Department, the IFC has no NICNET/LAN connectivity with the attached offices/ divisions at this IFC. Although work allocation chart is provided for referrals, copies of departmental instructions only concerning transfers and postings are communicated to the IFC, not for other policy matters. The Citizen's Charter is not displayed in the IFC. However, a copy of the RTI Act is available. The Annual Report of the organization carries a section on the RTI, though not on the IFC. The Contact person favours better integration between the IFC and RTI as RTI requests are being received in the IFC itself. Both the Counter Incharges are SO, RTI. There is a six member staff at the two IFCs. This includes Clerks, Assistants and Group D staff. The Counter Incharge of the Ministry of Chemicals and Petrochemicals has been entrusted the additional task of addressing Parliamentary questions. It was brought out during discussions that there are very few requests for facilitation work.

The jurisdiction of the Department of Chemicals and Petrochemicals covers chemicals, petrochemicals and pharmaceutical industries. The Counter Incharge at the

IFC is expected to be aware of all these sectors of the industries. Sufficient staff with clarity in knowledge is needed. The Counter Incharges expressed the view that persons dedicated to public interest should be posted at the IFCs. Recruitment process should explore the possibility of taking people from both inside and outside the organization. Candidates belonging to NGOs, private organisations etc. could be considered for the purpose. This, however, is not without its limitations.

Regarding information database requirement, the Counter Incharge underlined the need for coordination between Departments dealing with related issues. All attached and subordinate offices should be directed to communicate information to the IFC. The databases of these offices should be networked at the IFC. For example, information regarding the impact of fertilizer on soil productivity, for which database is prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperation, should also be available with the IFC of the Department. However, there is no coordination between the two Ministries. A fertilizer monitoring system with a focus on which fertilizer is needed where in the country is available with the Ministry though not at the IFC, which is a constraint. Technical training is required, which should be organized at regular intervals. The constraint that training is not readily available when required has been underlined.

In case of Chemicals and Petrochemicals the scope for facilitation could be enhanced, it was opined, if the Counter Incharge undertook formal visits to the PSUs to get apprised of the practical problems at that level. There is indeed a need to strengthen the link with the ground reality. Improved networking across the various levels of the organization as well as decentralized information dissemination with a view to improve public policy are required to address the concerns of people.

IFC of the Ministry of Steel

Access to this IFC is quite difficult as it is situated in a remote corner at the backside of Udyog Bhawan and there are no direction indicators. It is quite hard to search for it in Udyog Bhawan without the help of guards and other users. Besides, at this IFC there was no display board with the name of the organization at the entrance, which made it even more difficult to locate it. This IFC is an air-conditioned office. Compared to

some other IFCs, it is more spacious, though not adequately so. There are just two chairs for visitors. The RTI desk was found adjusted within the physical space of the IFC. The IFC has a two-member staff- a UDC who is the Counter Incharge and an Assistant who receives RTI applications. There was a computer with printer, and telephone facility. There was no photocopier; one was badly needed. The IFC did not have the fax facility. However, that was not considered a critical requirement since the receipt and issue (R&I) section alongside served the requirements.

Visitors to the IFC are very few in number. In fact, no visitors were seen during the three visits that were undertaken to this IFC. Visitor's register was not maintained either. This IFC primarily receives RTI applications. Yet, the names of APIOs/ CPIOs/ Grievance officers had not been displayed at the IFC. The CPGRAMS or any local PGRAM is not being used at the IFC. It is not possible to track the status of either RTI applications or grievances. Grievance Cell is separate. Grievances are not received at the IFC. Besides the Grievance Cell, which mainly takes in public grievances, there is a Minister's Cell and a Coordinating Cell, which deal with staff grievances. Printed material on schemes and services was not available. No forms are kept at the IFC. Copies of the Information Handbook brought out by the Ministry under the RTI Act, 2005 were also not available at the IFC. The Citizen's Charter of the Ministry was not displayed; nor was it available in hard copy form.

Copies of departmental instructions are not communicated to the IFC; nor is a work allocation chart made available to it. The IFC was not in a position to provide access to the visitors to the officers people sitting inside the security zone. The IFC was not networked with the attached and subordinate offices and field offices of the Ministry. Intra-organisational networking is not through computer database but through telephone. No NICNET was operational at the IFC. No report is prepared on the activities undertaken by the IFC; nor is a section on the IFC included in the Annual Report of the Ministry. One Under Secretary and one Assistant are the total staff at the IFC. No specific training needs were identified, since only RTI applications are being received at the IFC. However, it is important to ensure that the IFC staff is well trained to handle networking needs as well as the assessment of people's needs and provide for these.

On account of the recent move towards liberalization, the quantum of work in the Ministry has been reduced considerably. With that the activities at the IFC level have also been reduced. Last year, only three requests had been received for facilitation. Hence, the Ministry is considering having the CPIO as the facilitation officer, which would effect a merger between the twin functions of RTI and Facilitation as this would be economical for the Ministry. However, it is important to take care of the mandate of the Ministry and work on the areas which call for information facilitation in the altered context in the interest of the new meanings of accountability.

IFC of the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy Sources

The IFC of the Ministry is situated at CGO complex on the ground floor of the building and is easily accessible. It is an air- conditioned facility with adequate seating arrangement for visitors. Being next to the Reception makes it convenient for the visitors to approach it and get passes made for gaining access to officers inside the security zone. There was no computer, printer, photocopier or fax at this IFC though telephonic access was possible. Touch screen kiosk had been provided though it was not working.

People from civil society and individual citizens approach it to get printed material on non-conventional energy projects, seek clarifications regarding information provided on the web site, facilitation in gaining access to the officers sitting inside the security zone, and submit RTI applications. Although RTI applications are received; grievances are not received at this IFC. There are drop boxes kept outside the IFC for grievances. The Counter Incharge was often not available at the IFC. The Annual Report and some other publications of the Ministry were on display at the IFC and available free of cost. Copies of the Information Handbooks brought out by the Ministry under the RTI Act, 2005 was not available, however. Some printed material on schemes and services was available at the IFC; forms were also available. Although some information about regional offices along with contact points of all senior officers have been provided on the web site, it was felt that they could not be approached for every kind of query; nor could all gain access to these. Information Facilitation Counter is therefore needed irrespective of whether some contact points have been mentioned on the web site.

The IFC does not have a meaningful presence in the organization. It is simply seen a desk for receiving RTI applications. Copies of departmental instructions and work allocation chart were not communicated to the IFC. The facility has not been duly publicized through the media to attract visitors though there is considerable interest in non-conventional energy sources in the media and society in general. A well maintained data base is extremely important for it play any significant role.

Two visits were made to this IFC. The Counter Incharge was not found on his seat during either of the visits. The person at the Reception alongside was not aware of his whereabouts either. During the second visit, it was known through the latter, however, that the rank of the Counter Incharge is SO. He had no support staff. The IFC was manned by a single person. No training had been provided to him. The Ministry needs to create capacity in the IFC and enable the organization to appreciate and respond to the needs of IFC. Discussions were held with the Deputy Secretary, Incharge of the IFC, about the Information Facilitation Counter and issues related to the Citizen's Charters and public grievances. These were considered positive developments towards improving interface with the public. There is a need, however, to strengthen the capacity of the IFC to assess and deliver facilitation needs more accurately.

IFC of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas

This IFC of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas is situated at Shastri Bhawan. Access to the IFC is not very difficult as it is situated in the front row and can be seen from across the road though there is no distinct board declaring either its location or its functions. The IFC is an air-conditioned office. There is inadequate seating arrangement for visitors. Only one person can be attended at a time and there is little space for the visitors to stand and wait for their turn in the IFC. However, because of lack of demand such a situation is not witnessed often. Names of CPIOs/APIOs, and PG officers have not been displayed at the IFC. The computer at the IFC is not connected to the divisions of the Ministry. There is a photocopier though no fax.

The IFC did not seem to have any rush of visitors. The Annual Report of the Ministry, however, points out that 2,500 persons approached the IFC in the year 2006-07.

RTI applications and grievances are received at the Counter. PG Cell is part of the IFC. There is a ten member staff at the IFC, including the peon. Out of these, five are dedicated to RTI and four to PG. The Counter Incharge of the IFC is a Consultant with the Ministry. Along with him is an SO who works in cooperation with him. The Consultant is a retired official of the Ministry. The Indian Oil Corporation finances this office. The PG Cell at the IFC does not have Internet connection. It is not possible to expect them to operate the CPGRAMS. However, we were told that it was under the active consideration of the authorities and would be provided soon. Most of these concern problems with Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG). It is also not possible to track the status of RTI applications and public grievances received at the Counter since the database has not been maintained and also because the PGRAMS is not operational at the IFC. The staff at the IFC feels better integration of the RTI and the IFC would help since information seekers under RTI and those pertaining to IFC broadly seek similar information.

As regards facilitation, visitors, we were told, sought information regarding selection procedures pertaining to dealerships/ LPG distributorships of petroleum products, specifically, procedure for applying for dealership/ LPG distributorship, Annual Report of the Ministry and statistical analysis related to the oil and gas sector. Guidance was provided about how to set up dealerships/distributorships. Though information has been put on the web site of the Ministry, people visit the IFC for clarifications about the information, which is there on the web site, It is also doubted that the information provided on the web site of the Ministry is updated. The IFC is therefore expected to provide updated information.

The IFC did not have any scheme booklets or any information brochure of the Ministry or information on any matter related to the Petroleum and Natural Gas sector. The Citizen's Charter though not displayed was indeed available in hard copy form. However, since the Charter has not been updated, contacts of officers provided therein are no longer valid. The Charter is also not proactively communicated to the clients or stakeholders who visit the IFC. Copies of the latest Annual Report of the Ministry were available at the Counter. Copies of the Information Handbook of the Ministry brought out under the RTI Act, 2005 in the prescribed format were not available in the IFC. The IFC

official was not able to confirm whether these could be downloaded from the Ministry's website in case the visitors asked for the same.

Copies of departmental instructions were communicated to the IFC though the work allocation chart was not provided. Forms required for various purposes were not available either. The upgradation of the IFC carried out last year was regarding maintenance and repair work only. Upgradation did not touch upon substantive areas like database at the IFC, connectivity, and most importantly revisiting the mandate of the IFC in consonance with the Charter programme. Senior officers, it was repeatedly asserted, visited the IFC on a weekly basis. No report, however, is prepared on the IFC. The Annual Report of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural gas also does not include any section on the IFC. External review of the IFC is supported by the staff at this IFC.

The Ministry has not been paying enough attention to the IFC. Information database needs to be developed. Policy guidelines, as also changes, if any, that are affected from time to time, need to be communicated promptly to the IFC for relevant communication to the information seekers. Better connectivity with the PSUs through the Internet is required at the IFC. Knowledge regarding the working of the organization should be imparted to the staff, which should be handled by the organization itself or by the DoPT. Staff at the IFC generally disagreed with the contention that dispensable staff was posted at the IFC. Shortage of staff has been expressed as a constraint. No support staff has been provided, which hinders the effective functioning of the IFC. The Contact Officer emphasized the need for technical training for the IFC staff, which has not been provided so far.

IFC of the Ministry of Home Affairs

The desk of the Ministry of Home Affairs is alongside the desk of the Department of Personnel and Training at North Block. There is a computer with printer, which is not connected through LAN to the computers of officers sitting inside the security zone. There is no photocopier and no direct telephone line- only intercom facility is there. The Visitors, most of them belonging to various organisations under the Ministry of Home Affairs, come to submit their RTI applications and grievances at the IFC.

RTI applications and Public Grievances are the two main activities being undertaken by the IFC. The IFC works more like a coordinating office, as grievances received from all over India are sent to the relevant Departments in the State Governments and regularly followed up at the IFC. Regular weekly/monthly reports are sent to the Joint Secretary who keeps a tab on the developments. The Counter Incharge diarises all RTI applications and Public Grievances which are received, issues acknowledgements regarding each case, receipts, deposits cash in the cash section, prepares performa for depositing cash, deals with the public who come with their queries, attends to telephonic enquiries, gets passes prepared for visitors who wish to access officials sitting inside the security zone. On an average, 150 RTI applications alone are received at the desk. RTI applications cannot be tracked at the IFC. If, however, no reply has been received to an application for more than 2 months, users could bring in their grievances and the Counter Incharge helps track it through access to relevant sections. CPGRAMS is not being used here although as per the Joint Secretary's directive, all officers are supposed to access the CPGRAMS at their desks. Hence, grievances cannot be tracked at the IFC. Visitors have to contact SO, PG Cell, to know of the status of their grievance. Thirty out of the 145 grievances received in the year, we were informed, had been successfully disposed of. The level of satisfaction of the aggrieved was assessed after the redress was offered. If no further queries were received, the matter was deemed settled.

No scheme booklets were available at the IFC in hard copy form. These are available on the web site of the Ministry. On request by a visitor, schemes are downloaded and handed over by the Counter Incharge. However, application forms are available in hard copy form. There is no Charter of the Ministry and therefore the question of its being displayed does not arise. The IFC does not receive copies of departmental instructions. The Annual Report of the Ministry of Home Affairs carries a section on the IFC, wherein, information regarding facilitation offered is provided. This is big ministry, which deals with diverse subjects. There are also many attached and subordinate offices of this Ministry. The ideal arrangement with respect to IFCs would be that databases of these offices are be accessible at the IFC of the Ministry. Any query received with regard to any of these offices should be addressed at this IFC. To that end,

capability needs to be developed. A UDC is the Counter Incharge who looks after the work at the IFC. Although the Counter Incharge did not articulate any specific staff requirement or training need, required technical skills to handle the CPGRAMS and address other facilitation needs is essential and should be provided.

This IFC could be developed to the extent that representations could be received here. The Counter Incharge of the IFC should be a sufficiently senior person who has access to officers in the security zone. The networking needs of IFC should be attended in order to make facilitation possible.

II

IFCs of Departments

IFC of the Department of Posts, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology

The IFC is situated on the ground floor opposite the Reception Counter at Dak Bhawan. There are no indicators or display board put up outside or within the premises of Dak Bhawan to suggest that it is an IFC. People will reach it only if they know of its existence specifically. This facility was previously only a Public Grievance Redress Cell. Recently, the added function of information facilitation has been given to it. The same Cell is now called “Customer Care cum RTI Center”. It is an air-conditioned facility. One of the advantages of the facility being alongside the Reception is that passes can be issued to the visitors who need to Contact Officers sitting inside the security zone with relative ease. In the Bhawans, where IFCs are located a fair distance away from the Reception, it is very hard for the common person to get a pass made even after permission has been granted for the same through the IFC. There is adequate seating arrangement for the visitors at the Reception. There is a computer with printer but no photocopier. This makes it difficult for the visitors to obtain copies of the information they need. A copy of the Citizen’s Charter could be xeroxed only from the market at some distance.

A visitor's register is maintained at the Counter. Very few people, however, visit the facility. People generally approach the facility to lodge grievances and to submit RTI applications. Grievances related to any postal circle in India can be lodged here and could also be tracked here. This facility also enables the tracking of RTI applications and public grievances, which can also be tracked at the IFC through the PGRAMS. Queries are also attended telephonically. There is no touch screen information kiosk though need for a kiosk is felt at the IFC, which would also be useful at the post offices for self-help enquiries on the part of users.

Some basic information of interest to the public is available on the Department's website. Each post office also acts as a dissemination point for information related to the Department. The Post Office Guide Part-I, Part-II and Part-IV also provides basic information of interest to the public in relation to the organization and services. The Annual Report and Handbook of Information, which contain important information about the Department, are available on the website. Hard copies are also available in Administrative Offices for reference. Pamphlets had earlier been kept at the IFC for dissemination. These were subsequently withdrawn on the ground that these generated little demand. There were also very few visitors at the IFC. However, it was felt that such print material should be made available at the IFCs at the post offices where the people would demand them in larger numbers.

Interaction with users and agents at the G.P.O brought to light the requirement that information needs to be communicated to the users about some of the basic rules and procedures regarding schemes in operation and the changes that are made from time to time in the same to prevent harassment of people by the staff who misrepresent rules or offer wrong guidance regarding some of the schemes that are in operation; there are too many rules regarding which the staff either have insufficient information themselves or twist facts deliberately as people cannot cross-question them in respect of those. Besides, people need to know about the various schemes in operation and their respective benefits in order to demand them sufficiently enough.

This facility offers a major service. Any RTI application concerning any Ministry can be lodged here. With respect to post, there is connectivity with all the circles all over

India through the net/phone and fax. Each post office also acts as a collection point for requests for obtaining information, which has to be obtained from other offices in the network. However, copies of departmental instructions and the work allocation chart are not communicated to the IFC. The IFC also does not find any mention in the Annual Report of Department. Nor has it been adequately publicized, which is one of the reasons why access to it is very limited. Report on the IFC is prepared in the PG section after information is asked for from the IFC.

This is a one-man counter managed by a Postal Assistant. No support staff has been provided. No training has been provided either. The Incharge was cooperative in his attitude and exhibited good public relations skills. His mandate, however, is only to receive the RTI applications and the public grievances, which are very few in number. He had the requisite computer proficiency to operate the PGRAMS. Networking skills remain an area for further training.

During a discussion with some of the visitors and officials, the need to provide clear time commitments for specific services, such as delivery of money orders and registered parcels, as, through the Citizen's Charter and some sort of sanction to be imposed on erring officials who fail to comply with the commitments made in the Charter was emphasized. The role of IFC in publicizing the Charter was also considered important by the service users. Publicity to the IFC as well as decentralized and networked IFCs right at the post office level are essential requisites for the effectiveness of the IFC programme in strengthening the citizen-administration interface.

IFC of the Department of Road Transport and Highways, Ministry of Shipping, Road Transport and Highways

Access to the IFC of the Department of Road Transport and Highways, Ministry of Shipping, Road Transport and Highways at Parivahan Bhawan is quite easy since it is situated alongside the Reception counter of the building near the entrance. It is a well-equipped air-conditioned office though lacking in space for the visitors and staff. A photocopier, computer with printer and seats for visitors, both inside the IFC and outside, in the waiting hall, has been provided. When asked about the adequacy of physical

facilities at the IFC, the staff felt that seating space is not adequate for the visitors, more so since RTI applications are also being received at the Counter. There is no separate telephone. The IFC shares a parallel line with the library. There is no fax facility at the IFC either.

People, particularly NGOs, come to the IFC to inquire about schemes on road safety and tenders, etc., to register grievances, or to submit RTI applications. A visitor's register is maintained at the IFC. Grievances are also received at the Counter, besides RTI applications. These can also be tracked, as PGRAMS is operational here. Inquiries are also attended though there are information constraints at the IFC. People are readily facilitated to visit officers sitting inside the security zone as the Reception is alongside the IFC. There are display boards that provide information about the officials handling RTI and PG. The front wall of the IFC displays the names and addresses of the Public Information Officer and Appellate authorities for the purpose of RTI. The names of officers for public grievance redress are also properly displayed. Inside the IFC, the Annual Report of the Ministry and the Citizen's Charter were made available on request. Information about the schemes and services of the Ministry and the various forms that are needed are available at the IFC.

All computers in the department are networked through LAN. However, updated information is not available at the IFC. There is lack of cooperation from division heads with regard to information communication to the IFC. The latest policy decisions are not always communicated to the IFC. Copies of departmental instructions and the updated work allocation chart are, however, available on the web site. The IFC does not enjoy any significance in the organizational framework of policy making and implementation. Even a change in telephone numbers etc. of people sitting inside the security zone was often not known at the IFC when it should have been communicated readily to the IFC. To get over the bottleneck, the staff had to make proactive efforts on their part to keep all information available with them. The IFC prepares a half yearly report on its activities. The Annual Report of the organization contains a chapter on the IFC.

A Data Processing Assistant is the Counter Incharge. There is a UDC also who receives RTI applications. The Counter Incharge feels that there should be at least five to

six dedicated staff with technical competence, including systems analysts and a dealing hand to provide the required support at the IFC. Systems Analysts are needed to develop the required information database and carry out the necessary changes from time to time and handle connectivity with other IFCs, which has been proposed. It was also expressed that the IFC should be managed by a sufficiently senior officer, at least, of the level of Under Secretary, who is not only familiar with the working of the Ministry at various levels but is also able to get information from the divisions.

Staff at the IFC emphasized the need for connectivity with other IFCs through the net, which would be of value to the visitor. This was especially important for those handling subject areas that have ramifications for the work handled by this particular Ministry, such as, the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Rural Development, Development of the North Eastern Region, etc. Networking with other related specialties can enhance the relevance of the IFC. The information, which should ideally be available under facilitation, has usually to be sought under the RTI Act. Understandably, the number of RTI applications would come down if the IFC started functioning as per its mandate.

IFC of Department of Telecommunications, Ministry of Telecommunications

The IFC of the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) is housed at the Sanchar Bhawan, in a large hall, which includes the Reception desk. This makes access to officers sitting inside the security zone easy compared to IFCs in Bhawans where the Reception is a fair distance away. However, one cannot know from outside the building that an IFC exists in Sanchar Bhawan. There are no direction indicators anywhere. If access to the IFC has to be improved, it is important to give publicity to the IFC as well as the services it offers. It is a large facility with adequate physical space and air conditioner. This is one of the few IFCs, which have drinking water and toilet facility though both need maintenance. There is no photocopier or fax at the IFC. According to the staff at the IFC, since these two facilities can be accessed in the Section, no bottleneck is being experienced in this regard.

The IFC is visited by private operators who are clients of the department for business purposes. Some students had come to the IFC to inquire about admit cards, which they had not received for exams conducted for recruitment under DoT. Required access to officers sitting inside the security zone is facilitated by the IFC as Reception is in the same hall as the IFC. Visitors are facilitated to meet the officers that they need to inside the security zone. The RTI applications are received at the counter. Grievances are not received in the IFC. Visitors are referred to the PG section in case they wish to submit their grievances. Since PGRAMS is not operational at the IFC and there is no touch screen information kiosk, either the status of RTI applications and/or grievances cannot be tracked here. Copies of scheme booklets were not available at the IFC when visited. The Annual Report carries a brief section on grievances. It is available on request. There is no mention of the IFC or the queries received under RTI in the Annual Report. Copies of the Information Handbook brought out by the Department under the RTI Act, 2005 are not available at the facility.

The IFC does not prepare any report on its work. Information is given to the PG section where monthly compilations of figures are done and reports are prepared. Copies of departmental instructions are not communicated to the IFC though the work allocation chart is made available at the IFC by the O and M section. The Counter Incharge opined that if the IFC were placed under Joint Secretary Administration, it would be possible to address the constraints regarding availability of print material as well as shortfalls in infrastructure. Presently, the issue is lost in endless referrals. It was also opined that PG related matters should be reported to DPG through the IFC. This would, however, imply a dual reporting mechanism for the IFC, to Joint Secretary Administration for print material and infrastructure etc. and to DPG for grievances.

The Counter Incharge is a UDC. There is one support staff that takes in RTI applications. Besides, a member of the Wireless and Planning Coordination Section sits at the IFC on Wednesdays and Fridays and interacts with members of the public to sort out their queries. There has been no training given to the IFC staff. The staff had no understanding of the concept of information facilitation at all. Staff was inarticulate regarding the specific functions performed at the IFC.

The IFC performs primarily a post office job. The mandate of this IFC needs to be revisited. The organization would need to work on identifying areas where facilitation could be provided to the users. Constraints that hamper the exercise, whether policy related or procedural may be identified for further progress in this regard. IFC may take a proactive role in identification and provisioning of service quality norms.

IFC of the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry

The IFC of the Department of Commerce is situated in a corner at the backside of Udyog Bhawan and there are no direction indicators to it. One would have considerable difficulty locating the office. Facilities at the IFC are quite bad. There is no ceiling fan, no AC, any photocopier or place for visitors to sit. The night duty cell shares half of the space inside the IFC. There was a cot lying there, which, we were informed, was used by the guard. This state of the IFC is rather embarrassing for the visitors who come to the IFC from all over India and expect it to be a respectable office. Postmen use the suggestion box kept outside to drop mail. The Counter Incharge at the IFC had to run around delivering the dak to the higher officials in the Department. There is no place for visitors to sit. This is quite a sorry state of affairs, shocking in fact, considering the significance of this IFC. There is a computer with a printer though no photocopier. The IFC can be accessed telephonically though there is no fax.

On an average, around twenty inquiries are received everyday at the IFC. Inquiries at the IFC pertain to a wide range of issues such as Regional Trade Agreements, WTO, Anti-dumping, Free Trade and SEZs. A visitor's register is maintained at the IFC. Although grievances are not received at the IFC, people can drop grievances in the grievance box. The Grievance Cell is separately located where grievances can be tracked. The CPGRAMS is not operational at the IFC. The status of RTI applications or grievances cannot be tracked here. As per the half yearly Report for July-December 2007, 143 grievances were received regarding various issues in the Department of Commerce.

Latest material on schemes and services in print is not communicated to the IFC though it is available in the Department. Although one could see some scheme booklets

in the IFC, we were told that the division heads did not readily communicate the latest ones. Forms required by the visitors for various purposes are available. The Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT), which is an attached office of the Department of Commerce, collects and collates information regarding exports and imports on CDs. They provide priced publications, as also, the publications that are free of cost.

Intra-organisational networking is informal, through telephone, on a case-by-case basis, not through networked computer database. Hence any query concerning the attached or subordinate offices or field offices of the Department of Commerce cannot be attended at the IFC. The Counter Incharge considers the information database to be quite inadequate. Besides, IFC is a one-man counter. No support staff has been provided. If there is a shortage of staff, the IFC and RTI Cell should be merged, felt the Counter Incharge. RTI Cell presently is on the fifth floor, which should ideally be located outside the security zone. Though no specific measures have been undertaken to publicize the facility, report on the IFC is prepared on a half yearly basis, and a section on the IFC also appears in the Annual Report of the Department of Commerce. Transparency is one of the mandates, which the IFC needs to fulfill. Web site should be developed to include research inputs that are provided from time to time for the purpose of transparency. Copies of transfer/promotion orders of officers are not communicated to the IFC. Presently copies of departmental instructions are not communicated at the IFC though updated work allocation chart can be accessed on the net.

There is no Group D support staff at this IFC. The Counter Incharge who is an Assistant mans the Counter all by himself. It was expressed that the Counter Incharge should be a gazetted officer who may be supported by a professional team to offer facilitation with regard to diverse areas such as public-private partnerships, Overseas Indian Affairs and Commerce and Industry. It was also pointed out that the duties and responsibilities of Contact Officers and Coordinating Officers at the IFC are quite generalized, which weakens the accountability of these offices. Training, felt the Contact Officer, should also be provided to the SOs and Under-Secretaries responsible for the IFCs although mandatory provisions regarding training should be waived in case of very senior persons. An important suggestion offered was that there should be clear specifications regarding the number of visits that the officers should make to the IFC.

Reception counter needs to be reworked. It should be close to the gate. Pass should be provided only after the visitor talked to the officer concerned, and if his requirement could not be met at the IFC. The need to take a fresh look at the position of the Receipt and Issue Section and PRO to establish better coordination between the receptions, the PRO and Receipt and Issue section was emphasized. It was strongly felt by the Counter Incharge that regular feedback should be sought on each case referred from the IFC to the senior officers once access was provided to a visitor through the IFC. Further clarification/facilitation should also be provided through the IFC.

IFC of the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, Ministry of Commerce and Industry

This IFC is located at the Udyog Bhawan. It has the disadvantage of remote location, more so, since there are no direction indicators to point to it any where in the building. It is an AC room with a seating capacity of 5 to 6 people. It has a four member staff and one section officer who deals with the applications under RTI. There is no photocopier or fax and no demand has been expressed for these by the IFC staff. There is no touch screen kiosk though it would help if it were made available. There is considerable skepticism regarding the usefulness of the RTI Act, as, most of the requests being received under RTI Act did not serve any worthwhile purpose; it was expressed during the discussions with the then Counter Incharge.

By moderate estimate, the IFC gets fifty visitors on an average per day. However, there is no register to maintain a record of visitors. The display board declared it as a facility for entrepreneurial assistance. Some information of pertinence to the entrepreneurs was available on the web site. They are personally guided if they come to the facility to ask for information. Some forms required by visitors are available at the IFC. The IFC issues industrial licenses, issues acknowledgements to applications received in that regard. Applicants can follow up on their cases through the IFC. The website is not accessed much by the users. Applications are generally submitted in person. Interaction with users brought to light that they are facilitated to fill up their forms through detailed instructions that are attached to the forms given. This is a best

practice that should be emulated by other IFCs. Telephonic enquiries are attended. RTI and PG Cell are separate from the IFC. The O & M section prepares report on the IFC. The IFC itself is not mandated to prepare its Report.

Copies of departmental instructions and the work allocation chart were available at the IFC. A section on the IFC is included in the Annual Report of the organization. During the initial visit, it was expressed by the Counter Incharge that there was poor coordination within the Department, due to which, information/access constraints are experienced at the IFC. The Counter Incharge was an Under Secretary. There were four other staff members. The Counter Incharge was not aware of the Citizen's Charter of the Ministry. No specific training requirements have been articulated by the staff at the IFC. However, it is evident that training regarding the organizational commitments to the citizens as well as understanding the requirements of visitors and addressing them is essential.

Visits by the senior officers to the IFC are rare. There have been no attempts to invite inputs from the staff at the IFC in high-level meetings organized for the development or review of the IFC facility. The Counter Incharge recommended external audit- to carry out external audit DARPG was preferred to other agencies. No internal reviews have been conducted to refurbish the IFC as per the Charter exercise.

The visitors present during the visits were asked to share their views about the facility. The feedback received was quite positive during the last visit. Though the facility is not cramped for space, users felt that more space and modern furnishing befitting to the office should be provided to this IFC. Touch screen kiosk should also be provided. During the earlier visit it was emphasized by the Counter Incharge that the IFC required more windows for access; sieving and sifting of complaints and directing each to the right window would help streamline the process at this IFC. A note had been moved by him for upgradation of the IFC and also for a more appropriate display board, which mentions it as an Information Facilitation Center.

IFC of the Department of Heavy Industry, Ministry of Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises

Although the web site of DARPG mentions the location of the 'IFC' of the Department of Heavy Industry, in effect this is only an RTI desk- no other facilities are available. Being at the backside of Udyog Bhawan it is quite hard to trace. There are no direction indicators anywhere in Udyog Bhawan. It is an air-conditioned facility with adequate space for visitors to sit. There is a computer with printer. No visitor's register to maintain visitor's record has been kept.

Stakeholders of the Department of Heavy Industry come to the facility to submit RTI applications. During field visits, however, no visitor was found. Positive impact of the Right to Information Act was reiterated in no uncertain terms by the Counter Incharge at this facility. It has made governance transparent and public officials accountable in that it marked a distinct breakaway from traditional closed-house nature of bureaucratic functioning where officials did not fear individual accountability. Complaints received at the Counter have showed an increasing trend as awareness has spread about the RTI.

Interaction of visitors with the Counter Incharge was also quite limited in scope as no facilitation is being provided at this Counter. Only information under RTI is provided. No print material is kept for dissemination since the IFC has no mandate in this respect. Information available on the computer was last updated in October 2007. A copy of the Citizen's Charter as well as the RTI Act, 2005 was available at the IFC. No publicity has been given regarding the IFC in the media. The only measure in this regard has been a board displayed outside the IFC. No details regarding the IFC have been put in the Citizen's Charter, which is there on the web site of the Ministry.

Computer proficient staff is considered desirable for the IFC since they can handle the work requirements of the IFC satisfactorily. At the same time, there is a need for training the staff in information management and delivery. Higher officials have no interest in visiting the Counter for purposes of improvement. The Contact Person for the IFC revealed that he had never been invited to meetings with senior officers in the Ministry and officials of the DARPG regarding IFCs though within the Ministry, a meeting under the Joint Secretary was held regarding modernization of the IFC to which

he was called to share his experiences regarding work performed at the IFC. No internal review exercises have been taken up to analyze the working of the IFC; there have been other exercises to which the Contact person formed part of the team, in which requests for furniture etc. had been made. No external reviews have been carried out and none are considered necessary by the Counter Incharge.

IFC of the Department of Personnel and Training

This IFC is also at the North Block and rather difficult to reach. One has to inquire on the way from the Guards about the location of the IFC. The IFC of the Department of Personnel and Training and Home Affairs are two chairs, placed alongside, within the common physical space allotted for the two and also the IFC (Section, in fact) of the Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB). The display board only contains the contact of the coordinating officer. No other contacts of CPIO or APIO or PG officers of the two facilities have been mentioned. The facility is air conditioned and provides adequate number of chairs for the visitors, though no drinking water and toilet facility. The Counter Incharge underlined the desperate need for a photocopier and a telephone facility- at present only intercom is available. It was not clear as to why the IFCs of these organisations were placed together. There is hardly any rationale as the functions of these two organisations are poles apart. The Ministry of Home Affairs is concerned with Internal Security and handles the paramilitary forces whereas the Department of Personnel & Training looks after personnel matters and also caters to the training needs of Central Government officers and staff. The arrangement has not helped in any way.

Most Visitors at the IFC are Central Government staff, who generally come to file their grievance or inquire about the status of their complaints. A Section Officer is the Counter Incharge. To support him, there is one UDC and an Assistant. DARPG's CPGRAMS is being used to receive grievances, which are mostly from the staff in various government organizations and pertain to service matters, such as suspensions, transfers and pensions and provident fund matters. Grievances are received through post, Internet, through DARPG, in person and also in print form. The organization does not

have a Citizen's Charter. It apprised the visitors about the IFC through newspaper advertisements that were issued from time to time.

RTI applications are not received at the IFC. These are received directly in the Central Registry Section. Visitors who come to submit RTI applications are referred to it. Acknowledgments are issued within a week's time for the grievances, which are received. Follow up on grievances is also possible at the IFC. Grievance analysis presently is not being undertaken to identify the problem areas in policies and procedures with respect to which most number of grievances are received. The IFC also facilitates access to officers inside the security zone. As per requirement, copies of departmental instructions are communicated at the IFC and the work allocation chart is also made available. However, efforts should be made to assess and address the facilitation and information needs and other concerns of people in a proactive manner.

III

IFCs of Organisations

IFC of the Employees State Insurance Corporation, Ministry of Labour

This IFC is situated at the Employees State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) Head Office on the ground floor and is relatively easy to approach. There is a computer with printer but no touch screen facility. Information on the computer is updated regularly. Suggestion drop box, we were informed is an active facility in this organization and is opened daily. This IFC was last upgraded in December 2006. Upgradation constituted creation of additional facilities at the IFC.

An average of ten visitors approach the IFC every day. Visitors generally seek information related to benefits under the ESI Act, especially medical/cash benefits. Suggestion/complaint and visitors' books are maintained at the IFC. Inputs regarding this IFC were received through the structured questionnaire. Major functions performed at the IFC are (a) giving guidance about compliance under the ESI scheme (b) clarification of doubts of beneficiaries and (c) redressal of grievances of beneficiaries.

Telephonic enquiries are entertained and replied to. There is a system of updating information online for individual queries also. In case the information could not be made available immediately, the names of officials/section concerned and the date by which information would be available are conveyed to the visitor. Based on the record available in the PG Cell, it is possible to ascertain the current status of applications a few days before the information becomes due. In case information is not available on due date, reminders are sent to the concerned department/ office/ branch office. There are clear specifications regarding the progress of applications once these are received at the IFC. However, there is a lack of authority to act proactively to render desired assistance. Need for better connectivity between the RTI Cell and the IFC was stressed by the concerned officer on the ground that “basically both RTI Cell and the IFC deal with information and so both supplement the function of each other”.

Senior officers, we were informed, visit the IFC weekly to check facilities at the IFC, ask for analysis of grievances and complaints received, talk to visitors present, and examine reports. Publicity has been given to the IFC through the media as per input received through the questionnaire. Information related to the IFC is included in the Annual Report of the organization as well as in the Citizen’s Charter of the organization, which is displayed in the IFC. A copy of the RTI Act is available on request. Details of the IFC are not included in the Departmental web site. Considering the nature of work that is carried out at the IFC, an Inspector level officer, who has field experience and awareness of the ground realities, was considered best suited to the task. In view of the increased connectivity that would be inevitable in the coming times, however, technical training was considered necessary at regular intervals. Till now, no such training has been organized for the IFC personnel.

Unlike most other IFCs, the Counter Incharge informed that he had been involved in high-level meetings with senior officers in the Ministry and the DARPG regarding improvement of the IFC facility. However, the discussions never extended to the mandate, rather these were limited to the PGRAMS system. The internal review exercises, which have been undertaken from time to time, also involved the Counter Incharge. Last internal review exercise was undertaken to review pending cases. The organization supports external review as it “will be more independent and will help in

bringing out the shortcomings of the IFC better.” Ministry of Labour and Employment is the preferred agency to conduct the review. Such a review has not been undertaken till now. Lack of manpower and Resources are regarded as the major constraints hindering the effective performance of IFC and need to be addressed.

IFC of Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB) and Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance

The IFC of the Foreign Investment Promotion Board is located at North Block. It is near the reception. For a first time visitor, access is rather difficult. The IFC of the Department of Economic Affairs alongside, has been set up as a part of the Right to Information Cell of the Department outside the security zone, for dissemination of information to the public. Both of these IFCs have been set up within the same physical facility. Some distance away through a narrow alley where some extra chairs and a water cooler have been kept, though within the same physical facility, are the desks of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Department of Personnel and Training.

Visitors often come to the IFC to find out the status of the proposals, which they may have submitted. The facility declared as a Facilitation Center of the FIPB is actually only the organization’s Section, which has been housed in the space provided. A Section Officer heads it. It does not do any work that an IFC is mandated to carry out. Section of the FIPB has two desks. No RTI applications are received. No Public Grievances are received. Alongside it, there is the desk of the Department of Economic Affairs, where a lady receives RTI applications. On the wall, the Citizen’s Charter of the Central Board of Excise and Customs (CBEC) is displayed. The hard copy of the Citizen’s Charter was not available for the visitors.

As per information provided about the IFC on the web site of the Ministry of Finance, the public can access unclassified information from a single source at the IFC of the Department of Economic Affairs without entering the building. In effect, the IFC is not functioning at this level. It is strictly an RTI Counter. The public can submit their application at the IFC Counter under the RTI Act 2005 and can obtain copies of the

documents or inspection of records, against standard payments. The web site of the Department of Economic Affairs has all downloadable forms, instructions about procedures, the Annual Report and other relevant reports and is also an interactive web site. However, there are queries regarding the information provided in the website which needs to be settled at the IFC. Besides, the officers in the security zone are not always using the interactive mechanisms provided in the web site. Senior officers are also not expected to do the PR job. These reasons are considered significant enough to create the justification for an IFC.

The Counter Incharge informed that the requests regarding clearances were satisfactorily dealt with at the IFC of FIPB both telephonically and in-person. Follow-ups regarding requests/queries sent were also entertained at the IFCs. To the extent that the IFC serves as a window of access for the users to the top rung officials, it is considered a useful facility. Both the IFCs claimed to facilitate contact with officers sitting inside the security zone if requested. Copies of the Information Handbooks brought out by the Ministry of Finance under the RTI Act, 2005 were not available at the IFCs. The IFCs have no touch screen facility.

The Department has quite a few organisational divisions within it, including the Bilateral Cooperation Division, Budget Division, the Infrastructure Division, and the Capital Market Division. It is important to gauge user demand in respect of information and facilitation requirements other than the RTI queries and make the same available at the IFC. Presently, contrary to their claims it seems unlikely that the staff at the IFC is able to provide facilitation and information with regard to all the above divisions of the Department. Copies of departmental instructions and work allocation chart for the IFC of DEA are available on the Internet. Monthly reports on the IFC are prepared in the Section, and a section also appears in the Annual Report of the Department. Presently, staff at the IFCs is most inadequate in terms of both numbers and capacity to attend to the diverse information and facilitation requirement at the IFC. Any analysis to find out the information requirements of existing and potential users has not been attempted by the two IFCs of the Ministry of Finance. Facilitation needs of users and the information gaps need to be identified and addressed by the IFC.

IFC of the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT), Ministry of Commerce and Industry

At Udyog Bhawan, there are no direction indicators to any IFC. It is not very remote and the front wall displays 'IFC DGFT' clearly enough. In terms of facilities, this is one of the best IFCs. The lay out is good. There is a reception desk, the Public Relations Officer's office, and a separate desk for work related to processing. It is also an air-conditioned office, which has been well kept in terms of cleanliness and maintenance of infrastructure. There is adequate seating arrangement for visitors, drinking water and toilet facility at this IFC. Photocopier is not there though that was not pointed out by the staff as constraints since the section above has photocopy and fax facility. It is easily accessible as and when required. The Counter Incharge is a Public Relations Officer. There is good staff strength of ten to twelve persons including UDCs and LDCs. Reception is manned by a person from the Ministry of Home Affairs, as per the mandate of the Ministry in this regard.

This IFC is visited mainly by exporters. Most of the queries received at this IFC relate to marketing. Research workers/students also come for information inputs. RTI applications are received at the IFC, as are public grievances, though the Public Grievance Cell and the RTI Cell are located separately. The status of RTI applications and grievances cannot be tracked at the IFC since PGRAMS is not operational at the IFC.

There are alternate institutions to address the information needs of exporters and importers. Important among these are the Promotion Councils, which are more elaborate facilities that disseminate information regarding imports/exports. Information dissemination is also done through the thirty-four field offices throughout India, though far-flung areas are currently not being reached through these offices. For example, there are no offices beyond Guwahati, though tremendous marketing potential exists there and information is hard to access. Information dissemination is also done through books, journals that are available in the open market. There is no involvement of the IFC in any of these activities.

The IFC does not hold a significant position in the organizational scheme of things. Copies of departmental instructions are not communicated to the IFC, though the work allocation chart is made available. As for connectivity, no intra-organisational network is operational though the Internet is functioning. Intra-organisational networking is primarily attempted through telephone, not through networked computer database. No report about this IFC is prepared; nor is any information on the IFC included in the Annual Report of the organization.

The DGFT does not function as a single window for exporters. In view of the problems faced by the exporters regarding taxes, custom clearances, finding buyers for exports etc., the need for a call center was underlined. However, the question remained as to who would bear the cost?

IFC of the Delhi Development Authority, Ministry of Urban Development

Access to the IFC of DDA at Vikas Bhawan, INA, is not difficult though there is no display board near the gate declaring the facility as Information and Facilitation Counter and its mandate. Inside the facility, it is quite difficult to access officials even though there are Counselors for referrals and providing assistance in that regard. One has to know the exact room number and block to reach an officer and no one among the IFC staff at the ground floor seemed to be sure of the same. The Research Investigator was referred to the Deputy Director General PG/PR who sits on the fourth floor of Block B. The Counselor did not specify the block. After considerable difficulty, the office could finally be located.

This IFC, however, is a very different compared to the others visited in terms of the facilitation work. It is actually a large hall where counselors were available to help people fill up forms, etc. and guide them to go to the relevant counters for specific services, such as housing, accounts, etc. There are information kiosks with touch screen facility which users can access to know the status of their applications regarding registration, etc. The first kiosk was not found in working order. This was unexpected since technicians were expected to check the functionality of these three to four times a day. The second kiosk was also not working either. The third kiosk was working and

people were busy checking their priority status on it. Some of the users were seen accessing the service. For the computer-resistant visitors, particularly, counselors were considered quite helpful in providing relevant access and facilitation.

This is a busy office as many visitors come to inquire about the status of their applications with DDA. As a rare gesture of sensitivity, wheel chairs are kept at the reception counter for the facility of the physically challenged visitor. Visitor's register is maintained but is kept in the Almirah and taken out only on request. The visitor's register mostly contained complaints and suggestions of the visitors. The complaints registered therein were mostly about misdemeanor on the part of staff and lack of cooperative attitude.

Since 2000, a number of citizen-friendly measures have been initiated by the DDA based on their own articulation about user requirements and user feedback. Intimations from the office to the visitors are all now sent by speed post- previously, mail used to often get lost, causing considerable hardship to the people. There is a separate RTI section within the facility. On the day of visit, about 25 applications had been received under the RTI. The officer concerned expressed that well-meaning people did not use the RTI. Example was given of a person who had set himself up as a middleman, drawing required information from the office under RTI.

DDA has a facilitation counter called *Suvidha Kendra*, towards the far end of the hall. At the time of the visit, there were no users at the Counter. It is not possible for a visitor to guess what the facilitation center is meant for. Inside the facility, however, there is ample physical space and comfortable seating arrangement for the visitors. On the front wall of the IFC facing the big hall, the Citizen's Charter is displayed. Also displayed is information about public grievance redress and contacts for applications under RTI.

It is noteworthy that the Citizen's Charter of DDA promises access to information through guidebooks on procedure relating to Land, Housing and Building Plan Sanction etc. and on various schemes etc. notified from time to time; by making available formats of documents for various transactions at nominal cost; by providing information on movement and status of the various cases on Public Hearing Days; by keeping the public informed on major decisions like relief schemes, housing schemes etc. through

newspapers etc.; by appointing Counselors in all Departments and locating them at the Reception for providing information and guidance to the public. Most of these commitments have been addressed through guidebooks. Feedback registers were kept in an Almirah and made available only on specific request. Forms pertaining to various activities, however, are available. There is a complaint/suggestion processing system in place at DDA. Every Monday, the inputs received from the citizens are sent to DDG (PG/PR) for review. Action we are assured is taken immediately on the complaints received and suggestions made are considered for adoption. An example was given when a suggestion made by a visitor about special consideration for senior citizens, which was adopted by the organization. There is also a display board in the main hall declaring awards for the best suggestion makers.

Access is an area where improvement is desired. As pointed out above, it is difficult to meet officers in various blocks upstairs despite the IFC. Hence a work allocation chart is needed which helps Counselors guide the visitors properly in this respect. While DDA has made significant moves to facilitate information, feedback may be regularly obtained and a systematic analysis of feedback can help improve things further.

IFC of the Directorate of Estates, Ministry of Urban Development

This IFC has a very remote location in Nirman Bhawan and is quite hard to access. There are no direction indicators or display boards anywhere in the building to suggest its location and the purpose for which it should be visited. There is a display board, indicating the name, designation and phone number of the relevant authorities. Question of access has to be addressed, to add to the utility of the IFCs in general. The IFC is equipped with an air-conditioner a computer, printer, xerox facility, scanner, photocopier (not functional) an information kiosk (not functional) and there is enough space to accommodate as many as fifteen persons at a time. However, the physical state of the IFC suggested that it had not been upgraded in recent years. The ceiling leaks, which makes it difficult for the visitors as well as the staff during the rainy season.

This IFC receives many visitors. An average of 250 visitors is claimed to be attended by the IFC everyday. House allottees often come to make inquiries about their status in the waiting list, fill up forms for various purposes and secure access to officers inside the security zone if required. It was possible to make enquiries at the IFC and also through the web site at the user end. Within the IFC, there is a separate application counter for RTI. A complaint box had been kept though its physical condition did not suggest that it was ever used to drop in any complaints. Copies of the Information Handbook brought out by the Directorate or Ministry of Urban Development under the RTI Act, 2005 were not available at the IFC. Citizen's Charter was, however, displayed on the wall.

The Charter of the Directorate underlines the commitment of the Directorate of Estates to make available information regarding position in the waiting list to all Government officials who apply for Government accommodation and the number in waiting list which has been covered up to a specified date; the position in the waiting list for those who have applied for a change in their allotment; the monthly license fee payable by all allottees of residential houses and shops, at the time of allotment; the subject dealt with by the various officers of the level of Deputy Directors and above, their names, telephones numbers and location along with their visiting time. The Charter also promises that the Director of Estates will open Information and Facilitation Counters (IFC) in all its offices to provide the above information as also other computerized and regularly updated information regarding the date of priority covered for any type of houses at any point of time etc., besides the names, designation, telephone numbers and addresses of the officials dealing with different subjects. However, during discussions with staff at the IFC, it emerged that the Charter is not a functional document in any way in the organization in that there are no references to it in the communications received-whether internal or external. It is only a ceremonial item. It had therefore made little difference to the organization and its functioning.

The Counter Incharge asserted that the IFC had made a definite difference in service delivery regarding the provision of government accommodation to employees in public service. Prior to its inception, there used to be huge backlogs of applications. As a result, many applications remained unattended at the end of the financial year- pending

applications at the end of the year had to be taken up in subsequent years as a part of a rolling plan. Further improvements, using IT, are in the process of being implemented. The Counter Incharge was still under a lot of pressure due to excessive paper work as there is a shortage of staff at the IFC. Senior officers we were told do not visit the facility to check for requirements. There are no routine visits by the senior officers to take stock of things periodically at the IFC. These could help address some such problems experienced by the visitors and the staff. During the last visit that we made in April 2008, the Counter Incharge had changed; so also had the pattern of public dealing.

Review of the Charter and active communication of the same to the users is an expected area of improvement. Not much improvement has come about in the amenities provided at the IFC over the years. Besides, it is felt that since the suggestion drop box is hardly used, proactive inviting of suggestions by the staff at the IFC in the visitor's register itself may be followed as a regular practice. Efforts should also be made to encourage the staff to articulate constraints and requirements and suggest possible ways of meeting these. This can help further improve the delivery.

IFC of the Urban Land and Development Office (L&DO), Ministry of Urban Development

Access to this IFC at Nirman Bhawan is quite easy as it is situated in the front row. It is an air-conditioned office with sufficient seating arrangement for visitors. There is a computer with printer though no photocopier which causes inconvenience to the staff at the IFC. This IFC also has touch screen facility. The IFC gets a regular stream of visitors who come to make inquiries regarding their land deals. RTI applications and grievances are received here. Names of officers have not been displayed at the IFC. Grievances are classified as those related to Substitution, Mutation, and Freehold. Grievances can be tracked through the PGRAMS, which is operational at the IFC. Queries of people are attended in person and also telephonically.

Printed material on schemes and services, as also, the application forms required for various purposes by the visitors were available at the IFC. When visited, the Citizen's Charter was not available in hard copy form; nor was it displayed anywhere. It is

noteworthy that the L&DO commits in its Citizen's Charter that it will provide information on sale permission, mutation, substitution etc. through a printed brochure entitled "information for the guidance of lease holders" through the Information and Facilitation Centre to be opened in all offices of the L&DO. It also promises to ensure quality of service by intimating the Lessees of any change in the procedure or policy by a Public Notice in the press and also through prominent display of such information on the Notice Boards in the office and in the Information Facilitation Centre; disposal of applications on conversion sale permission, mutation, substitution etc., within a period of three months from the date of receipt of the information and other papers submitted by the lessee are in order; giving clear indication of the charges demanded for breach of terms of the lease e.g. unauthorized construction etc. along with full details, which should be payable within 30 days of the date of receipt of demand by the lessee. And if things go wrong detailed information regarding the grievance redressal procedure, as also, names, addresses and telephone numbers of the designated Grievance Redressal Officers, would be displayed on the notice board of the office as well as at the Information Facilitation Centre.

Copies of departmental instructions were communicated to the IFC. Work allocation chart was also available. There is no LAN connectivity with computers of officers inside the security zone or with those organisations regarding which grievances/queries are received. Networking, as in the case of most other IFCs, is through telephone. No report is prepared on the IFC. The Annual Report of the organization does not provide information about the work carried out at the IFC.

There is a four member staff at the IFC- 2 UDCs and 1 LDC besides the Counter in Charge who is also a UDC. The Counter Incharge brought to light during the discussion that lack of knowledge about the rules and regulations inhibits the facilitation effort at the IFC. For the IFC to provide meaningful help to the visitors, it is imperative that the staff be given training, wherein, they are apprised of all the rules and regulations and the objectives related to the application of those rules and regulations.

Information Facilitation Counter/ May I Help You Counter of the Central Board of Direct Taxes, Department of Revenue

The address of the facility was downloaded from the web site of *corecentre.htm*, which gives the list of the Information Facilitation Counters/May I Help You Counters of the Central Government Ministries and Departments. When the facility was visited, it was found that the address provided on the web site is actually not that of the IFC but that of the Public Relations Officer of the Income Tax Department. It is an air-conditioned office with adequate chairs for visitors. There is drinking water facility though no toilet facility. There is a computer with printer, but no photocopier or fax, which are needed. The staff at the office favoured information kiosks, which, according to them, would greatly facilitate matters for the users.

People only came to file returns at this office. Access through the Reception is easy. When Income tax returns are filed, the room is packed to capacity with up to 50 visitors at a time. A visitor's register is not maintained, as it is quite considered difficult to diarize all the queries, which are far too many at a time. Forms are available on the web site of the CBDT, which can be filled up. Queries in regard of forms are addressed at the office. Telephonic queries are also attended besides in-person requests for facilitation. Access to officers is also facilitated through the office of visitors as per their requirements as known through queries. RTI applications are not received here, as all officers in the organization have to accept RTI applications as CPIOs for matters falling within their jurisdiction. Public Grievances are also not accepted. There is an Income tax help line, which is widely used by people to register grievances. The staff at the office is unaware of the CPGRAMS of the DARPG. Grievances cannot be tracked from the user end at this office.

Forms are not available in hard copy form at this office though the staff has repeatedly requested for the same. Latest schemes and services are not available in print either. The Citizen's Charter too is not available in hard copy form. According to the staff, the Charter is quite inconsequential as nobody ever paid attention to it. The work allocation chart has not been provided. Copies of departmental instructions are not

communicated to the office, which makes it particularly hard for the staff to address the queries related to them. The staff itself has to find out facts related to the latest policy changes, as intra-organization coordination is weak and therefore a constraint. There is no periodic report prepared at the office though it sends out monthly information on the bills regarding expenses incurred on vehicle provision for senior members of CBDT.

The IFC has a seventeen member staff in the office. There is no staff shortage in this office. However, organisational support in respect of communicating all required information at the IFC is lacking. Training to network and facilitate effectively, as also, identify the facilitation needs is important. Lack of intra-organization coordination needs to be remedied.

Consular Passport and Visa Division, Ministry of External Affairs

This facility is quite a visible one, adjacent to Patiala house at Tilak Marg, hence not difficult to access at all. It is a building, which houses an entire office. Reception is on the ground floor where passes can be secured. It is air conditioned with basic amenities and facilities for staff and people, that is, drinking water, toilet, seats for visitors etc. The website of DARPG mentions this as an Information Facilitation Counter/May I Help You Counter of the Ministry of External Affairs regarding passport matters. However, on reaching there, one finds that this is not an IFC but an office where passports are sent for verification/rectification in case errors have been discovered, and information on legalization is provided. These activities are undertaken at separate places in the same building. There is an ordinary reception counter where one has to go for referrals and passes. The Ministry of External Affairs does not have an IFC.

The front wall of the building displays 'information on legalization and right to information'. All specifications regarding legalization have been clearly made. Time limits for the delivery of attested documents and commercial documents are clearly laid down. There are two help lines: one to report on bribes and the other for general complaints and providing other miscellaneous information. The board displaying the Right to Information Act, 2005 provides details regarding where applications are to be submitted and who are the PIO and the appellate authorities along with contact addresses.

The staff at the office is unaware of the CPGRAMS of the DARPG. Grievances cannot be tracked from the user end at this office.

Copies of the Information Handbook brought out by the Ministry of External Affairs under the RTI Act, 2005 were not available here. Work allocation chart was available at the reception. Since it is not an IFC, copies of departmental instructions in respect of changes in rules, regulations, procedures etc. are not issued. There is no networked database with other formations of the Ministry of External Affairs. Access to officers in the Ministry of External Affairs is not possible through this office.

Nothing is known among the service users about the IFC for passport related queries. There are also no May I Help You Counters, where they are needed most, that is, at the level of the outlet. The need for this was apparent during a visit to the Bhikaji Cama Passport Office for a user survey. Almost every user pleaded for a counter, which can guide people regarding various tasks involved in getting a passport, for which they approach the facility. Staff shortage was cited by the concerned officer as the reason for inattention to the task, despite awareness of the requirement. Requests have often been made for it. However, this could not become a reality.

IFC at the Safdarjung Hospital

This IFC, as it is mentioned on the web site of the DARPG is only a reception counter. Access to this reception counter near the Emergency is most difficult if one follows the address indicated on the web site, which merely says, opposite AIIMS, Ring Road. The inquiry counter is situated at Gate no. 6. If one gets into the hospital through the gate opposite AIIMS, one would have to do a U round of the premises to reach the inquiry counter near Emergency. For someone visiting the hospital for the first time, it would take quite some time to locate the reception. Many visitors in the premises were found inquiring about the Reception. The reception counter is too small and quite inconspicuous. The direction of the Counter should be indicated at every entrance of the hospital. The Charter of the organization on the web site also fails to provide any useful information about the IFC.

Visitors are a harried lot as wards are located a fair distance away from the main gates and there are no direction indicators or inquiry counters at suitable locations to help locate them. Visitors include patients and people who come to see them. At various places in the hospital, some information relevant to the visitors is displayed, such as, the PIO for RTI requests, the address of the medical superintendent and the PRO, relevant addresses to the Public Grievance Redress Cell- both suggestions and grievances are received in the PGR Cell located in a separate room. There is still considerable confusion evident at the level of visitors.

The Citizen's Charter is also displayed on the walls at various places. It calls upon the employees to attend to patients with utmost courtesy and reminds the citizens to keep the premises clean and cooperate with the staff. Although it just hangs on the wall and the staff appeared quite indifferent to it; it is credible that the organization has displayed the Charter. However, there is no information communication through the Counter regarding various schemes and services being run by the hospital for poor patients.

The Charter and the IFC should be understood as a tool to improve access of the people to the organization, create awareness regarding the welfare schemes in operation and facilitate use of those services by the people who are largely inarticulate. There are no printed handouts or proactive facilitation for the poor to avail of the facilities provided by those schemes. The organization has not given a serious thought to user requirements in this regard. A small suggestion/complaint box was found hanging on the wall of the emergency ward. This, however, was not much used by the people.

A proper facilitation counter needs to be set up at an easily accessible location for the purpose of enquiries and securing other benefits such as wheel chairs, stretchers etc. Quality of interaction with the patients needs considerable improvement. Proposed IFC should have facilities like facilitating access to the PG Cell, or even accepting grievances and tracking disposal in a time bound manner. It is desirable that the IFCs when established in the hospitals should be inter-linked for quick inquiries and referrals *inter se* and through a reporting mechanism with the IFC of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare at Nirman Bhawan. Staff at the IFC should be computer trained, familiar with

the staff elsewhere in the hospital and the various wards for quick referral. Good public relations skills would also be desirable.

Conclusion

The case studies discussed above point towards some variation in the state of IFCs, not only in respect of their visibility and facilities available but also in terms of the services delivered and the extent of utilization. Ministries and organisations, which deal with specific client groups or interest groups, which are resource rich and powerful enough to access the officers directly, rarely need the facilitation services of the IFC. In these cases, IFCs need to broaden their outlook and provide space to the people who bear the ultimate effects of decisions of these Ministries/ organizations. This would lend a role to the IFCs that adds substantially to improving the state of governance.

Ministries with a large interface and a wide range of activities, with several departments, divisions, attached and subordinate offices were found lacking in infrastructure and human resource support. These were also deficient in networking and therefore often not in a position to deliver their mandate. In their case, facilitation is crucial as many of the service users are poor and marginalized sections of society, whose concerns should be addressed by the IFCs. There is therefore a case for strengthening these IFCs and further creating local IFCs which are well networked with the central IFCs. Only this can help contribute towards the goals of responsive administration and improved service delivery.

IV

Conclusion and Recommendations

Towards Revitalisation of IFCs

Visits to thirty-five IFCs of the Ministries/ Departments/ organizations of Government of India and discussions with the Counter Incharges, Contact persons and service users pointed towards a reality, which has turned far away from the grand vision which envisaged the institution of IFCs. Expected to become the human face of the Citizen's Charters, yet shorn of the requisite powers and resources to carry out their mandate, the IFCs have become little islands within their organisations. These information starved, understaffed, poorly maintained IFCs, struggling through a meager infrastructure and human resource support, remain invisible, inaccessible and unresponsive to the needs and concerns of citizens at large. The vision of effective and responsive IFCs contributing to an accountable and citizen-friendly administration has been buried along with the numerous directives issued by the DARPG. Barring a few IFCs, which still carry the memories of the initial drive that led to their being set up outside the security zone, and therefore seek to present themselves as information facilitation counters, others have chosen to become merely collection centres for the RTI and PG applications. The IFCs need not merely a rescue operation but an effective revitalization strategy, which can lend them credibility as well as capacity to make a difference to the state of public administration in the country.

This revitalization strategy should be aimed at improving policy delivery by facilitating effective policy utilization by the citizens. IFCs can create conditions for the active engagement of citizens with the policy making and implementation processes, as also, the policy monitoring and evaluation exercises. For that to happen, IFCs need to be placed in a respectable position within the organizational scheme of things.

There are three levels at which disconnect has happened between the IFC vision and the IFC reality. One, the level of demand; two, the level of supply; and three, the level of capacity. There is little demand for facilitation at most of the IFCs either on account of inaccessibility or poor visibility or on account of lack of awareness about the IFC and its services. The additional poser for the relevance of IFCs and therefore the demand for it comes from the RTI and e-governance initiatives. The supply disconnect is effected because of the poor information availability at the IFC, poor intra-organisational communication and lack of resource commitments to provide the facilitation, and the failure to provide for effective utilization in the framework of decentralization. The disconnect at the level of capacity for facilitation owes itself to both human resource shortage and lack of orientation and appropriate training of the staff at the IFC in particular and the organization in general. It is important to closely look at the various possibilities of addressing the three dimensional disconnect in order to examine the relevance and effectiveness of the IFCs and assess the need and prospects of their revitalization.

I

Relevance of the IFCs

Two main arguments are often used against the IFCs to the extent of suggesting their closure. Firstly, that RTI has made the IFCs redundant as it is possible for anyone to get information within a stipulated time frame without even having to cover the physical distance; and secondly, that as information is made available on the web site, IFC becomes dispensable.

While there is little doubt about the significance of both these initiatives, there is no reason to believe that the IFCs have outlived their utility on account of either of these. First and foremost, it is important to realize that the provision of classified information under the RTI, which has a legal backing and provision of unclassified information and guidance, in other words, facilitation, are somewhat different. Unlike RTI, IFCs are expected to not only disseminate information to the public but also facilitate its utilization. Blurring of the distinction between the purpose of IFC and that of the RTI

should be avoided, for people cannot be expected to avail of even unclassified information under RTI. The line of demarcation needs to be clearly understood.

It is also important to realize that there is no cost attached to the information which is supplied by the IFC, whereas, information under the RTI Act comes at a price. In the present context, the most significant question is that of availability of relevant information at the minimum cost and closest to the persons wanting such information. How this could be accomplished through the IFCs will speak for the success or failure of the IFC experiment. It is important to rethink IFCs from the perspective of information provision to the poorest of the poor and at the least cost of time and resources and the facilitation of its utilization.

The issue of citizen requirements being addressed is quite crucial to the capacity of the IFC to gain relevance and meaning. There is no effort to ascertain the information needs and provide them in a proactive manner. In most cases, IFCs do not even know about the policy or programme-related decisions taken by the organization. This is the main reason for not only the supply disconnect but also the demand disconnect faced by the IFCs.

It is ironic that the functions being undertaken by most of the IFCs are rapidly undergoing a change. Increasingly, IFCs are involved in only taking RTI applications and public grievances, paying little attention to the facilitation work, which they should be doing. In that context, it would be appropriate to think of IFCs as mechanisms, which can reduce the load on RTI by enabling information access instantaneously and at local points themselves. Reducing time and travel cost should be the objective. The use of technology can become instrumental in this exercise of fixing responsibility for information provision locally.

A careful analysis of the utilization of IT based solutions in specific states/districts suggests that rather than make IFCs redundant, IT based solutions, if applied appropriately, can make IFCs more meaningful and enable these to assume greater responsibility for facilitation. There is a need to revitalize IFCs through innovative use of IT solutions for required intra and inter organizational networking, thereby not only enhance the capacity of IFCs to address the supply disconnect but also provide for an

increase in demand for facilitation to utilize information made available on the web. In a country marked by a huge digital divide, e-governance can carry a far greater meaning for intra-governmental processes than it can for direct citizen-administration interface. It is in this respect that IFCs can gain strength rather than loose meaning through IT initiatives.

II

Effectiveness of the IFCs

Location, Access and Visibility

Location issues are quite relevant to understand both demand disconnect and supply disconnect which characterizes many IFCs and has significant implications for their effectiveness. At the time of inception, it was considered important to set up the IFCs outside the security zone. In view of the fact that the difficulties faced by the common people in gaining access to information in an extremely bureaucratic set up were enormous. To get the pass made at the reception counter and meet the concerned officers for the information required by them, or even to know what information they could possibly use was a stupendous task for most people. It was felt that the IFCs located outside the security zone could facilitate access to information without posing any major challenge to security concerns of administration.

The security scenario has worsened over the years and the logic of retaining the IFCs outside the security zones remains as relevant as earlier. However, other developments, which followed the setting up of IFCs outside the security zone put into question the understanding that dictated the setting up of the IFCs outside the security zone. The fact that the IFCs are located outside the security zone accounts for a devaluation of the IFCs from the perspective of officers, making staffing pattern a problem area that needs to be addressed. Often, junior functionaries manage the IFC because senior persons have to be spared for 'other more important assignments' There is little prestige associated with an office, which does not provide the facilities, which the senior officers consider themselves to be worthy of. The availability of back-end support

depends upon the persons involved and the organizational dynamics, which get generated on account of the position of these persons, besides of course the technical support involved in providing the information.

Moreover, it is felt that all Ministries/ Departments/ organisations cannot possibly manage reasonable space outside the security zone. The space available outside the security zones is not decent enough to make it convenient for either the officers or the citizens to feel comfortable enough to effectively carry out the purpose of the IFCs. Many of the IFCs are located outside the Bhawans, in the garages, which lack even proper ventilation, making it an unpleasant experience for everyone involved.

In most cases, the very purpose of having an IFC located outside the security zone is defeated on account of the failure to link up the IFC with the divisional heads/ heads of attached and sub-ordinate offices and make all information available at the IFC. Since the IFC is not even apprised of the developments, policies and procedures adopted in the organization, the visitors, in any case, have to meet the concerned officer inside the security zone.

While one view regarding the handling of space and location problems is that a centralized IFC for various Ministries can be set up at a common place. There is the apprehension that this would dilute the very purpose of the IFC, which is to facilitate interaction with the concerned officers within the security zone, as all information is not available at the cutting edge level where people most expect it to be.

An alternative understanding of the IFC experiment is that because of its centralized nature it has failed to evoke widespread demand for information facilitation. Facilitation counters are only Delhi-centric and there is practically nothing to facilitate information at the rural level. Non-availability of the required information at local level is a major hindrance in the way of IFC success. Not many people are aware of the existence and purpose of the IFCs. Most of those who know of them cannot afford to visit them because of the distance involved. There is a case therefore for the proliferation of IFCs at various local levels. This will address the demand disconnect to a considerable extent.

Equally important is the question of publicity of the IFC. The lack of public information about the IFCs being one of the reasons for the poor rate of visitors or

information seekers at the IFC, wide publicity to these and the responsibilities assumed by these becomes crucial. For the purpose, it may be useful to think or take up a centralised approach to publicity. Both print and electronic media should be used. Not only that. Since many IFCs are located in the same building, it is important that all organizations make a mention of the location and direction of their IFCs outside the gate of the building. The organisations to which the IFC caters should be clearly mentioned at the entrance of the IFC on the Board. This is essential to remove the confusion regarding the scope and purpose of the IFC and enable the concerned citizens to know of its relevance to their concerns. All IFCs must also make a list of specific information and facilitation responsibilities which they would carry out and clearly display this at the entrance of the IFC. They should have the obligation to provide this information on demand and keep it in public domain even when not in demand.

Position in the Organisational Scheme

The place of IFCs in the organizational plan for responsive administration and effective service delivery has significant implications for the effectiveness of IFCs in contributing towards these ends. The IFCs can become a key link between the organization and citizens policy and thereby significantly enhance the possibilities of effective policy delivery. Over the years, however, one witnessed a devaluation of the IFC in the organisational plans. While in case of some Ministries, this manifested in the meager facilities provided to the IFCs or even withdrawal of facilities once provided, in others the funds as well as responsibilities assigned to the IFCs with regard to information facilitation have been shrinking and other divisions assumed these independent of the IFC- some of these have been appropriated by the publicity wing, others have gone to the e-governance wing. Often there was little coordination between these various divisions and the IFC was left with limited funds and powers to be able to carry out the challenge of facilitation in any significant way. The IFCs were reduced in many cases to mere collection centres for the RTI and PG applications. Disconnect between vision and reality on account of this trend towards devaluation was widely evident.

Most IFCs became a victim of organizational apathy. These organisations were not inclined to spare the more dynamic and vibrant officers for the IFCs as these never acquired a prestigious place in the organisational scheme of things. IFCs came to be seen as a dumping ground for those considered less efficient in the organisation. From the viewpoint of officers, too, the IFC was read as punishment posting rather than a reward for service or opportunity to serve the organisation. Being at the IFC meant being denied the opportunity to prove oneself. Shorn of the necessary infrastructure and authority within the organisational hierarchy further affected the IFC's capacity for delivery.

Sufficient care has not been taken in most cases to see that the required information in print is made available at the IFC, the web site is regularly updated, requirements of data base as per demands emanating from user groups over time are articulated and provided for, IFC stays clean and is not lacking in terms of basic amenities such as telephone, air conditioner, photocopier, etc. Many of the IFCs are deficient in the basic facilities. Most of the IFCs in the Bhawans, for instance, are located in the space meant for garages, which are poorly ventilated, do not get any sunlight, lack a reasonable drinking water and toilet facility Departmental instructions are rarely sent to the IFCs; nor is the updated work allocation chart made available, either in print or on the web site to all IFCs. There is no connectivity in many IFCs with the divisions in the main building. Information is not easily available. It is not regularly provided. IFCs are not apprised of the new developments, policies and procedures adopted in the organisations. Although in case of certain organizations, information about these is put on the web-site, much of it is not appropriately used due to a lack of training given to the Incharges and other staff which is placed at the IFC. Even where receiving RTI and PG applications is the only activity at the IFCs, it is not possible to do a follow up of the cases received - the IFC only passes on the application to the concerned office.

Most IFCs have not attempted any systematic analysis of the information management system. However, this is the first requisite for meeting information needs in the light of existing policies and programmes. Data bank needs to be developed and the frequently asked questions to be answered. All Orders concerning new announcements and new policies should be loaded on the web site. User queries in respect of these can be addressed properly only if copies of departmental instructions, especially in respect of

new policy announcements, are duly communicated to the IFC. All the Ministries/ Departments should examine this possibility. All IFCs should facilitate the submission of forms and completion of procedures related to accessing benefits of policies, programmes and schemes as well as invitations for participation in various activities of the organization, such as, tenders, submission of bills, etc. It should also be possible to do a follow up at the IFCs. Online processes should be encouraged for strengthening intra-organisational coordination in respect of these.

Intra-organisational coordination is crucial to make the IFCs effective instruments of the information facilitation. Mechanisms to ensure that intra-organisational coordination is effective need to be created. These may require a relook at the authority structures whereby the IFCs are not reduced to an insignificant appendage to the organization but remains the life line of the organization. The responsibility to plan and manage information and facilitation responsibilities should be assigned to the key functionaries in the organization, who may ensure that the IFCs are effective in identifying and responding to the needs of the citizens.

Elevating the place of IFC in the organizational plan can indeed help address the disconnect on account of poor supply of service to a considerable extent. The need for altering the authority structure of IFCs cannot be undermined to further its effectiveness. Some Contact Officers emphasized the need to place the IFCs under the JS, administration, as this would result in a better response to the infrastructure and information needs felt at the IFCs. However, other issues remain to be addressed through a more comprehensive strategy for instituting the IFC to a place of significance in the organizational framework and ensuring that the requisite conditions for its effectiveness are created.

Regular review of the activities, accomplishments and problems experienced by the IFCs should be undertaken by the organization and an action plan to address the reasons for the three dimensions of disconnect, pertaining to demand, supply and capacity should be prepared and placed in the public domain. At the present state of disregard, most IFCs are not visited regularly by the senior officers. Efforts to analyse the needs of service users and plan for improving the efficiency and responsiveness of IFCs are

lacking. In some cases even the visitor's register is not assiduously maintained- this is crucial for undertaking any analysis of facilitation sought and provided for. Inviting feedback and suggestions from the service users should be a regular exercise and should be systematically carried out and reviewed for further improvement.

The IFC report should find a significant place in the annual report of the organisation. Performance of IFCs should be reviewed by the respective department-related committees too. This should be publicly commented upon and suggestions for improvement should be offered based on public interface which the parliamentarians have. This will increase organizational accountability for the IFC and make it more responsive.

Human Resource Development and IFC Effectiveness

Human Resource Development is an extremely significant requisite for the Effectiveness of the IFCs. This raises the question about the adequacy of personnel at the IFCs, the level of their seniority within the organization, the mandate available with them to obtain information from the divisional heads/ attached/ subordinate offices of the organization and the competence of the IFC staff to handle the responsibility of offering information and facilitation.

The harsh reality about the IFCs is that these remain grossly understaffed. The inability of the organizations to spare adequate staff for the IFCs defeats the very purpose of the IFC. As mentioned earlier, since the posting of officers with sufficient seniority at the IFC was avoided in view of the not so pleasant conditions of IFCs, most IFCs are at present manned by junior functionaries who do not have adequate support staff and are unable to carry out the mandate effectively. The Contact person in effect is not so much in contact with the ground reality at the IFC. There is little realization of the constraints experienced by the service users or the Counter Incharge in respect of the IFC. It is possible to explore the possibility of appointing IFC incharge from among the divisional heads in order to give them an exposure to the major concerns of the people.

The issue of outsourcing IFC staff may seem to offer a solution to the problem of shortage of staff; but it is not a very promising option for two reasons. One that the IFC staff must have not only an adequate understanding of the organization and its

functioning but also a significant position in the organization in order to be able to access the requisite information from within the organization and perform the facilitation function effectively. Two, information and facilitation responsibilities call for a responsive and accountable framework of functioning. In case of outsourcing these needs may not be effectively addressed and therefore, the IFCs may end up doing the ritual of offering the information which may be available from the organization. Accountability may get divided and remain difficult to fix in case of inability to carry out the job effectively. There is the additional question of why private operators would like to take up the responsibility unless these are money spinners. If users have to pay the price, will information become accessible to all regardless of the size of their pocket is a question that needs to be considered before the option of outsourcing is exercised.

It would certainly lend some advantages if IFC staff were internal to the organization and were appropriately trained to handle the information and facilitation requirements of the visitors in the context of policy delivery needs and organizational effectiveness. This training should relate to the networking tasks, which would be involved in accessing information from the concerned divisional heads/ subordinate/ attached offices and putting it up in the public domain. The training should also involve imparting information about where and how to obtain the information which may have to be provided, creating data systems and ensuring easy access by developing appropriate programmes for that.

The official perception of the role of IFCs needs to be corrected. The staff needs to be oriented to take up the responsibility of ensuring that the information sought as well as the information which needs to be shared is actually available at the IFCs and all those responsible for providing it have been intimated about its need. The Counter Incharges are at best attuned to think in terms of their capacity to respond to the individual demands which are received by them rather than thinking of increasing the possibilities of preventing the need for individuals approaching them for information or facilitation. The purpose of facilitation could be served without the IFCs being accessed individually is one possible scenario that needs to be realized through a pro-active approach of the organizational staff in general and IFC staff in particular. Officers inside the security zone are also quite indifferent to the concerns of the service users who approach the IFC.

IFCs remain incapable of addressing the vision on account of the lack of orientation and training of not only the IFC staff but also the organizational personnel in general. Unless division heads are oriented and trained to respond to the facilitation needs identified at the IFC, it is unlikely that sufficient response can be generated to meet the requirements.

Need for Information Facilitation Networks

Any sustainable and durable strategy for effectiveness of IFCs calls for a systematic exercise at the networking of their activities across the multiple levels of operation of policies and programmes. This requires a recasting of institutional relations at (i) the local level (ii) inter-organisational level and (iii) intra-organisational level. And this necessitates taking a relook at the way in which IFCs operate at present. We need not simply isolated Information Facilitation Counters but Information Facilitation Networks (IFNs). These networks should be well coordinated, duly informed, inclined and capacitated to effectively address the information facilitation needs of the people at large.

In case of the Ministries/ Departments/ organizations, which have a large public interface and which provide for schemes to be implemented across the country, facilitation function needs to be taken right upto the local levels. It is neither possible nor desirable that the people who are located far away from the government department/ ministry/ office should travel long distances in order to be able to get some basic information or facilitation. District/ block facilitation centres, which should be linked to the Ministries at the central and state government levels are needed. Here information management and information availability in an easy to access style should be provided. Mechanisms for wider public interface and information dissemination/ facilitation need to be created.

A centralized IFN can become a single window for various Departments/ Ministries/ organizations and should facilitate the organizations to become responsive and supportive of citizen concern for information and participation. This would require considerable inter-organisational coordination. A centralised IFN at multiple points can provide an effective bridge between citizens and administration and thereby make a major difference to the possibility of effective policy delivery.

The IFNs should be in a position to be proactive in delivering the policy and programme related information at local information points, which may be located at the district or block level. The IFNs at various levels should facilitate the submission of forms and completion of procedures related to accessing benefits of policies, programmes and schemes in far off regions too. Invitations for participation in various activities of the organization, such as, tenders, submission of bills, etc. should also be possible through these.

Language barriers to information and policy access need to be broken. This also calls for a decentralized approach to information facilitation. While e-governance mechanisms can enable an instant availability of information locally, it is not yet feasible to expect the users/ citizens in remote rural settings to access the required information through these technologies. Mechanisms need to be devised to ensure that the benefits of technologies can be delivered to the people at large. The identification of local information centres is crucial for the purpose.

A key question with regard to the local information channels relates to their ownership and management. Whether it is possible to set up these systems in the government sector, which implies significant resource commitments, or the possibility of experimentation with the private sector or the civil society institutions needs to be explored is an important question, which needs to be settled with due care for their capacity to serve the concerns of the people who are to be served.. Who would bear the cost and why, in case these are set up in the private sector? Who would determine the content in case there is a private provider and who would decide about the user cost, in case it is to be imposed, for the delivery of information or facilitation? These questions need to be pondered over carefully with an eye as much on accountability issues as the delivery issue. Responsiveness, equity and sustainability are indispensable issues too.

A bottom up model of IFNs should be based on a strategy to closely involve all stakeholders into generation of demand for information as well as engaging them meaningfully in the process of information provision, as through the PRIs or other community institutions. Selection and training of village level workers who would like to get involved in the process can be a crucial leap if the responsibility for the facilitation

work needs to be decentralized. The selection process may be activated through the gram sabha itself in order to ensure that it remains community centred rather than administration centred. This would also address the challenge of demand, supply as well capacity disconnect effectively.

Comparative Review and Analysis

An important mechanism for improving the relevance and effectiveness of the IFCs/ IFNs is a comparative review of the IFCs/IFNs and ensuring that it is placed for public comment and suggestions are invited regarding improvements in the same. The comparative picture on performance of the IFCs should also be placed on the web site of the DARPG. The parameters for performance evaluation should include the following:

- The number of RTI and PG applications received
- The number of visitors received for facilitation in addition to the RTI and PG applicants
- The Information Needs Analysis Report (INAR) and its periodicity
- The Action Taken Report on the INAR
- The information and facilitation channels created at dint levels.
- The number of visitors and type of queries answered at different levels
- The publicity efforts at different levels-about location and services offered
- The degree of integration- single window system
- The information availability Chart
- The activity analysis Chart
- The information seekers/ stakeholders analysis
- The policy needs Chart
- The IFC innovation Chart
- Training and orientation Chart
- The IFC appreciation analysis based on feedback review.

A public presentation of the comparative performance of the IFCs/IFNs would create sufficient pressure for performance and push the IFCs/IFNs in the direction of demand absorption, supply management and capacity building in terms of infrastructure support, human resource development and technology utilization.

Instituting an award for the best IFC/IFN of the Year based on performance evaluation, user satisfaction and responsiveness to user suggestions can further the process of activating organizational interest in revitalizing IFCs- civil society institutions and institutes of public administration may be associated with the process of selection of the best IFC. The IFCs/IFNs can be turned into effective mechanisms for policy delivery if there is a commitment to see this happen.

III

Action Plan for Ministries/ Departments/ Organizations

Immediate Action Plan of Ministries/ Departments/ organizations for the revitalisation of the IFCs and moving towards IFNs should have the following components:

- Identification of all stakeholders and clients and soliciting their views through the print or electronic media as well as other communication channels of the organization regarding their expectations from IFCs. Civil society institutions may also be involved in the process.
- Analysis of the information and facilitation demands over the years and managing its delivery in a proactive manner, including through procedural changes and administrative innovations.
- Mapping of information and facilitation needs of existing policies and programmes with a view to improve policy delivery and evolving a strategy for its provision in a proactive manner.
- Identification of the levels at which information and facilitation needs of specific kinds should be met and evolving mechanisms for internal networking- vertical

and horizontal- with these levels as well as with service users at these levels, ultimately aiming at Information facilitation networks, with single window facility.

- Working on the possibilities of coordination across publicity, e-governance and RTI wings and the IFCs to address the complex needs of information and facilitation and making these available instantly through the web.
- Identification and addressing of the infrastructure, technology and human resource needs and capacity development requirements of the IFCs, adopting a personnel policy, which elevates the status of the IFCs and committing resources to these on a priority basis.
- Organisation of training and capacity building workshops for the top management and staff in the organisation to better appreciate and address the information and facilitation needs of people and evolve mechanism for providing support to the IFC in meeting these.
- Giving wide publicity to the specific information and facilitation services offered by the IFCs and visibility to the physical and web based access points- may adopt a logo for publicity.
- Incorporating information about the IFCs and the services provided by these in the Citizen's Charter, the website, the Annual Report and other public interface and communication channels of the organization, as also, publicizing these through public meetings.
- Preparing for an effective monitoring and evaluation system which ensures both the organization and service users to regularly review the role and performance of the IFCs and thereby make the institutions of governance participatory, responsive and accountable.
- Ministries/ Departments/ Organisations which do not have an IFCs should expedite the process of setting it up and assigning it a meaningful role in the organizational frameworks of power and responsibilities.

IV

Action Plan for the DARPG

The DARPG needs to actively pursue its concern for the effectiveness of IFCs. It needs to:

- Revise and update its list of IFCs and their addresses, as also, the names and contact numbers of Contact Persons mentioned on its website. This should also provide a link to the IFC page on the website of the Ministry/ Department/ organization concerned and the details of information and facilitation provided by it.
- Carry out wide publicity campaign to enable the citizens to know about the IFCs and their role in provisioning information and facilitation.
- Seek the six monthly report on the functioning of the IFCs from the Ministries/ Departments and their organisations and place the reports on the website, also mentioning those who do not comply. The page should be update regularly.
- Take a quarterly meeting with contact persons to review the implementation of its guidelines and the effects of these on the functioning of the organizations.
- Carry out a comparative analysis of the performance of the IFCs and conduct user surveys to assess the same, and publicise the findings of the survey through print and electronic media, including its own website, annual report and other publications.
- Award the best IFC in consultation with the civil society organizations and the reputed institutes of Public Administration.

**The Information and Facilitation Counters of Ministries/ Departments/
Organisations Visited for the Present Study**

Ministries

1. Ministry of Agriculture
2. Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
3. Ministry of Labour and Employment
4. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment
5. Ministry of Consumer Affairs
6. Ministry of Rural Development
7. Ministry of Environment and Forests
8. Ministry of Railways
9. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
10. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports and Ministry of Culture
11. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting
12. Ministry of Civil Aviation
13. Ministry of Corporate (previously Company) Affairs
14. Ministry of Textiles
15. Ministries of Coal and Mines
16. Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers
17. Ministry of Steel
18. Ministry of New and Renewable Energy Sources
19. Ministry of Petroleum and Natural gas
20. Ministry of Home Affairs

Departments

21. Department of Posts, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology
22. Department of Road Transport and Highways, Ministry of Shipping, Road Transport and Highways
23. Department of Telecommunications, Ministry of Telecommunications
24. Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry
25. Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, Ministry of Commerce and Industry
26. Department of Heavy Industry, Ministry of Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises
27. Department of Personnel and Training, Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions

Organisations

28. Employees State Insurance Corporation, Ministry of Labour
29. Foreign Investment Promotion Board, Ministry of Finance
30. Directorate General of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry
31. Delhi Development Authority, Ministry of Urban Development
32. Urban Land and Development Office, Ministry of Urban Development
33. Central Board of Direct Taxes, Department of Revenue
34. Consular Passport and Visa Division, Ministry of External Affairs
35. Safdarjung Hospital, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

Annexure-II

Registered Participants in the Workshop on “Effective Functioning of Information Facilitation Counters” organized by IIPA and DARPG at IIPA on 18th February 2008

| | | |
|-----|----------------------|---|
| 1. | Dr. Ajay sehgal | Director Dept. of Food, TPTG Highways 1, Parliament Street, New Delhi |
| 2. | Shri Kailash Nath | Jt. Industrial Advisor Deptt. of Chemicals & Fertilizers Shastri Bawan, New Delhi |
| 3. | Shri Ravindra Babra | Assistant P.F. Commission Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation, H.O. 14, Bhikaji Cama Place, New Delhi |
| 4. | Shri Harish Anand | Deputy Director (Publicity) The DC(MSME) M/o MSME Nirman Bavan, New Delhi-110091 |
| 5. | Shri P.S. Chauhan | DARPG |
| 6. | Shri O. S.Narula | Dy. Secretary Ministry of Power |
| 7. | Shri D. Mandal | Section Officer Railway Board |
| 8. | Shri Kshitij Mohan | Under Secretary (PG) Deptt. of Telecommunication Sanchar Bhawan New Delhi |
| 9. | Shri R.K. Singh | Director (PG) Deptt. of Telecommunication Ministry of Communication Sanchar Bhawan |
| 10. | Shri k.s. Mahajan | Under Secretary (IFC) Min. of HRD Deptt. of Higher Education |
| 11. | Ms. Asha Mehta | Section Officer Ministry of Water Resources New Delhi |
| 12. | Shri s.s. Dayal | Dy. Director DGAR |
| 13. | Shri Vinod K. Samuel | Dy. Director-APIO Ministry of Railways |
| 14. | Ms. Madhumita Biswas | Jt. Director Ministry of Environment & Forest |
| 15. | Dr. D.C. Misra | Formerly Chairman Task Force on IT Policy Govt. of NCT of Delhi New Delhi-110092. |
| 16. | Ms. Lekha Kumar | DARPG |
| 17. | Shri Manish Mohan | DARPG |
| 18. | Mrs. Shyama Kutty | DARPG |