Smart Governance From

Reactive Service Delivery to Intelligent Public Systems

Roundtable Synthesis Report

WhatsApp Citizen Engagement & Innovation Forum 2026

11 March 2026 | Shangri-La Hotel, New Delhi

This synthesis was prepared under the Chatham House Rule. The views and observations recorded reflect the collective discussion. No statement is attributed to any individual participant or organisation.

Contents

Executive Summary

The Smart Governance: From Reactive Service Delivery to Intelligent Public Systems Roundtable convened senior officials from state governments and central ministries alongside leaders from Meta's WhatsApp for Business team. Convened as a closed-door, invite-only session during the WhatsApp Citizen Engagement and Innovation Forum 2026, the discussion examined how conversational platforms, artificial intelligence and integrated digital public infrastructure can accelerate India's transition from fragmented, portal-based citizen services to proactive, intelligent and citizen-centric public systems.

Participants represented states that are at varying stages of digital governance. Telangana and Andhra Pradesh have deployed AI-enabled WhatsApp bots serving hundreds of services with strong transactional volumes. Karnataka is building next-generation grievance classification and proactive entitlement delivery systems. Odisha is scaling its unified citizen services platform. Assam is preparing to integrate WhatsApp into its governance stack for the first time. The roundtable also included the representation from the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (Ministry of Rural Development - Government of India), which manages a network reaching over 10 crore rural households across India, and Meta's Asia-Pacific government partnerships lead, which brought comparative perspectives from Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia and the United States.

Several convergent themes emerged. States that have launched unified WhatsApp bots have seen rapid citizen adoption, particularly for high-frequency services. However, most deployments remain menu-driven, forcing citizens to navigate departmental hierarchies they should never need to understand. The group identified AI-enabled natural language interaction, in both text and voice, as the essential architectural shift required to make these platforms genuinely citizen-centric. The discussion also surfaced a significant gap in analytical infrastructure: states are tracking the number of services onboarded but not the depth or quality of citizen engagement, making it impossible to identify where digital services are working and where they are failing.

Beyond service navigation, the group explored proactive governance models, such as where the state anticipates citizen eligibility and delivers benefits without requiring any application, with Karnataka's flood relief and scholarship disbursement models cited as working implementations. The integration of emergency services, including women's safety SOS and ambulance dispatch with live location sharing, into the existing WhatsApp channel was identified as a high-impact, near-term priority. Voice-first and vernacular-by-default design was agreed to be a prerequisite for inclusion, not an enhancement to be added later.

A recurring theme across the discussion was the need to address institutional and political concerns about data sovereignty and platform trust, particularly in states where decision-makers remain cautious about delivering public services through private technology platforms. The group also converged on the imperative of the 'ask only once' principle, that is, eliminating the repetitive data entry burden that citizens face and on the need for cross-state learning exchanges to accelerate deployment in states where adoption has been slower.

The group's overarching conclusion was that India, uniquely, possesses both the digital public infrastructure and the political momentum to lead the world on intelligent governance. The challenge is no longer one of building the rails. It is one of design ingenuity, institutional will and genuine cross-system data integration.

Context and Framing

India's Digital Public Infrastructure has reached a globally unprecedented scale. The country's Aadhaar ecosystem provides a universal digital identity layer for over a billion citizens. UPI has created frictionless payment rails, processing tens of billions of transactions annually. DigiLocker holds hundreds of millions of verified documents. BharatNet is extending broadband connectivity to rural panchayats. WhatsApp reaches over 600 million Indians, a penetration so deep that the group described it, without exaggeration, as having become a synonym for the mobile phone itself. Taken together, the India Stack represents a digital public infrastructure architecture that governments across the world now study as a model for inclusion at scale.

Yet the citizens' experience of engaging with the government remains fragmented. Services are scattered across department-specific portals, each requiring separate logins, credentials and document uploads. Call centres operate within fixed working hours. Grievance systems require citizens to know which department handles their problem. And for rural and semi-urban populations, the barriers of digital literacy, language and interface complexity mean that physical offices and intermediaries remain the default path to accessing entitlements, even when the underlying digital infrastructure to deliver those entitlements already exists.

The roundtable was framed around a central question: India has built the digital rails, but how can the experience layer be reimagined so that citizens interact with the government as naturally and effortlessly as they message a friend or family member on WhatsApp? The platform lens for this conversation was WhatsApp, whose core advantage is that it demands no change in citizen behaviour: no new application to download, no portal to navigate, no fresh set of credentials to create or remember.

A context-setting presentation traced WhatsApp's evolution from a personal messaging application to a full-service government engagement channel. The

Government of Andhra Pradesh was the first to consolidate all citizen services under a single WhatsApp number, an initiative that began with approximately 160 services and has since grown to over 900. Telangana followed with MeeSeva, offering over 500 services with AI-enabled natural language interaction in Telugu and Urdu and 25 crore cumulative transactions. Odisha launched with 175 services and a voice-enabled interface. Beyond state governments, WhatsApp integrations now extend to Delhi Metro and Bengaluru Metro for ticket booking, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Government of India (for scheme discovery through an AI voice chatbot built in partnership with Sarvam) and parliamentary communications during the Lok Sabha session.

The presentation also highlighted WhatsApp's in-thread payment capabilities, which support all major payment methods, including UPI, credit and debit cards, Paytm and PhonePe with no incremental cost from Meta for payment transactions. This positions WhatsApp as a channel capable of supporting the full citizen journey: from service discovery through application through payment completion, within a single familiar interface. Participants were invited to build on this foundation of sharing what is working, what is not, what the infrastructure needs and where the genuine friction remains for citizens, for government officials and for the organisations seeking to bridge between them.

Discussion Themes

1. The State of Digital Citizen Services Across States

Participants shared assessments of their state’s standing on the digital governance journey. The discussion surfaced both the significant progress already achieved and a set of structural gaps that persist across even the most advanced deployments.

Rapid adoption where services match citizen demand. States that have deployed WhatsApp bots report strong uptake, but adoption is heavily concentrated in a small number of high-frequency services. In Andhra Pradesh, approximately 45,000 of the platform's 50,000 daily transactions are for Tirupati temple darshan bookings. This reflects a consistent pattern: when a service is in high demand and the WhatsApp channel is demonstrably easier than the physical alternative, citizens migrate rapidly. The challenge and the design imperative are to extend this adoption across the full breadth of services offered.

Service volume is not the same as service quality. Multiple states are scaling the number of services listed on their WhatsApp bots, with counts ranging from 175 to over 900. The group cautioned that the metric that matters is not how many services are listed but how many are being availed end-to-end by citizens without requiring them to fall back to a physical office or call centre. A service that is listed on the bot

but fails when citizens try to upload documents, requires forms that are too long for WhatsApp or has backend processes that are not connected to the bot, is not a meaningful digital service. The group agreed that quality of completion, not volume of listing, should be the governing metric.

Analytics infrastructure is lagging behind deployment. A gap identified consistently across participants was the scope for further development in the data infrastructure underlying current platforms. When asked basic questions like how many users are from rural versus urban areas, what is the frequency of service usage per individual citizen, where do users drop off in a service flow, etc., the data was often not readily available. One state noted that it had delivered over 1.83 lakh services through its platform within six months of launch, yet could not readily answer questions about who those citizens were or what segment they represented. Without granular analytics on who is using the platform, how often and from where, it is impossible to design targeted interventions to close adoption gaps.

Document upload requirements create disproportionate friction. A practical barrier raised repeatedly across the discussion is the requirement to upload photographs, certificates and identity documents as part of service applications. Citizens frequently encounter issues with file size limits, aspect ratio requirements and format specifications that their devices cannot easily meet, without a clear error message. The group identified smart compression, auto-formatting and integration with pre-verified document repositories such as DigiLocker as near-term solutions. The principle agreed upon is simple: if a file is too large, the system should resize it; it should not reject it.

Educational and informational services as the easy win. Services that do not require a physical touchpoint, such as examination hall ticket downloads, results, scholarship notifications and scheme eligibility confirmations, were identified as a category where WhatsApp adoption should be immediate and high. These are services where the inconvenience of visiting a service centre is greatest relative to the simplicity of the underlying task and where the awareness gap is itself a barrier: many students and families simply do not know when results have been declared or how to access them. These services should be prioritised in every state's next phase of platform expansion.

2. From Menu-Driven Portals to AI-Enabled Citizen Journeys

The discussions focused on the architectural shift required as citizen service platforms scale from tens to hundreds of services. The group's collective experience illustrated why the menu-driven model, however impressive at launch, becomes its own barrier to access at scale.

Menu navigation mirrors government structure, not citizen thinking. Existing WhatsApp bots and citizen service portals are organised around departmental hierarchies. To find a service, a citizen must first identify the correct department, then navigate through categories and subcategories. For a common citizen, this is expert-level institutional knowledge that they should never be required to possess. When a single number aggregates over 500 services, including approximately 200 temple darshan bookings across the state, navigating to one specific temple in a menu structure is more burdensome than visiting the temple in person. The group agreed that this is a design failure that needs to be addressed.

AI-enabled service navigation as the solution. Telangana's MeeSeva platform has moved to an AI-enabled chatbot where citizens type or speak their needs in plain language and the system routes them directly to the correct form and service workflow, regardless of which department administers it. The chatbot supports both Telugu and Urdu; voice input is enabled for citizens uncomfortable with typing. This eliminates the need to navigate departmental menus entirely and was described as the most significant design decision in MeeSeva's evolution.

AI-enabled informational queries beyond transactional services. An important additional value of AI-enabled chatbots is the ability to answer general citizen queries that are not transactional in nature. Questions such as 'Where is the nearest police station?', 'How do I reach a government office by bus?' or 'What documents do I need for a ration card?' can be answered instantly using a retrieval-augmented generation model built on existing government documents. The group saw this as a significant broadening of the WhatsApp channel's utility, where governance becomes not just a transactional service but a responsive information system.

AI-assisted voice form-filling for the last mile. The group discussed the potential for AI to assist citizens through form-filling processes via voice interaction. Rather than requiring citizens to type into form fields, an AI voice assistant could ask questions conversationally and populate the application on the citizen's behalf. This is particularly relevant for rural populations, elderly citizens and those with limited literacy or digital familiarity. The feature is already being piloted in some deployments and the group agreed it should be adopted as a design default, not treated as an accessibility add-on.

Payments as a natural service layer. Beyond navigation, the AI-enabled service journey also needs to support payment completion within the same conversational thread. In-thread payments on WhatsApp allow the full citizen journey, service discovery, application, payment and receipt to be completed within a single conversational thread. The platform supports all major payment methods without redirecting users to external applications. Participants noted that the real value proposition is not asking citizens to migrate to WhatsApp Payments as a standalone

product but embedding payment completion naturally within the service journeys they are already using on the platform. A citizen who books a darshan ticket, requests a certificate or applies for a scheme should be able to complete any associated payment without leaving the conversation.

3. Proactive Governance: Anticipating Citizen Needs Before They Ask

The discussion addressed an ambitious aspiration: a governance model in which the state identifies eligibility, reaches the beneficiary and delivers the service without requiring any action on the citizen's part.

Karnataka's flood relief: proactive governance in practice. The group heard a detailed account of how Karnataka implemented proactive relief delivery during a flood event. The state already held the data required: which areas were affected, what the survey numbers of affected land parcels were, who the registered farmers were and what their Aadhaar-linked financial addresses were. Relief funds were transferred directly to eligible farmers without requiring a single application to be filed. This was not a pilot. It was an operational implementation from 2021, cited as the benchmark for what proactive governance looks like when databases are linked and political will exists.

Scholarship disbursement without applications. A related example illustrated the same principle applied to education: when a Chief Minister announced scholarships for children of farmers, the state identified beneficiaries by cross-referencing its farmer registry with educational databases. The government already knew who the farmers were, who their children were, where those children were studying and what their Aadhaar-linked bank accounts were. Scholarships were disbursed without families needing to submit applications or even be aware of the scheme in advance. The group agreed that this model of combining data that the state already holds to deliver benefits proactively represents the direction in which all entitlement delivery should move.

Grievance redressal beyond office hours. Government call centres operate within standard working hours. Citizens tend to notice civic problems like blocked drains, power failures, road damage, etc., outside those hours. WhatsApp-based grievance channels can receive and categorise complaints continuously using AI-driven classification across text, voice, image and video. Karnataka's Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (RDPR) department has been operating an AI-based grievance classification system on WhatsApp. It removes the need for a human agent, operates around the clock and eliminates the need for citizens to determine where a complaint should be filed.

WhatsApp as the notification and confirmation channel. Even in proactive delivery models, there is a critical communication gap: citizens need to know that a benefit

has been credited, a service has been initiated or a new entitlement is available for them. WhatsApp was identified as the natural, low-friction channel for these confirmations. When a flood relief payment is deposited, when a scholarship is credited or when a citizen becomes eligible for a new scheme, a WhatsApp message closes the information loop instantly and at scale, without requiring the citizen to log into a portal to check their application status.

The foundational prerequisite: interoperable data. Participants shared about what makes proactive governance possible and what currently prevents it in most states. The fundamental challenge is that departmental databases remain siloed, with separate systems that do not communicate with one another. States that have invested in social registries and integrated data platforms, such as Karnataka, are able to implement proactive delivery. States where land records, social registry, financial data and education databases sit in separate departmental systems cannot. The group identified cross-departmental data interoperability as one of the most important infrastructure investments for enabling intelligent governance.

4. Emergency Services and Citizen Safety on WhatsApp

Significant discussion emerged around the integration of emergency and safety services into the WhatsApp channel. Participants made a compelling case that the unified state bot model, i.e. all services on a single number, has particular advantages for emergency scenarios, where speed of access and channel familiarity are critical. Citizens do not need to remember a separate number for women's safety, another for ambulances and another for the police. A single number, already saved on their phone and used daily for routine interactions, becomes the entry point for emergency response as well.

Women's safety through a single touchpoint. One state's women's safety team had been working on a standalone application for SOS alerts when the suggestion arose to integrate the function into the existing state WhatsApp citizen services number instead. The reasoning was clear: a woman is far more likely to have a government WhatsApp number already saved on her phone, one she uses for routine services like metro tickets, certificate applications or scheme enquiries, than to have downloaded and maintained a separate safety application she may never have occasion to use until a crisis. Sending an SOS or the word 'help' to a familiar, regularly used number is both more accessible and more likely to be remembered under stress. The group endorsed this approach as a model for emergency service integration.

Ambulance dispatch with live location sharing. A similar integration was described for the 108 ambulance service. The current process requires a caller to describe their location verbally to a call centre operator, a step that is often imprecise and time-consuming in an emergency. Through WhatsApp, the citizen can share their

live location with a single tap, routing it directly to the ambulance driver and eliminating the call centre step. The group saw this as a technically straightforward improvement that could save critical minutes in emergency response and should be prioritised as a near-term addition to existing state platforms.

5. Voice-First and Vernacular by Design: The Inclusion Imperative

The discussion on digital inclusion converged on a clear and unambiguous design principle: text-first interfaces, even on WhatsApp, exclude a substantial proportion of India's population. Voice-first, vernacular-by-default design is not a feature enhancement for a later phase. It is a prerequisite for genuine inclusion from the very beginning.

Text-based interfaces exclude the most vulnerable. Participants from states with significant rural, tribal and low-literacy populations emphasised that any service requiring citizens to read, type and navigate menus, in English or Hindi, let alone in a second language, excludes precisely the communities that stand to benefit most from digital governance. The National Rural Livelihoods Mission, which works with over 10 crore households, including 91 lakh self-help group members, noted that the women it serves, many of whom have limited formal education, cannot be expected to learn new digital interfaces or navigate complex workflows. For this section, voice interaction in regional languages is not a desirable feature, but it is the only realistic path to digital inclusion.

WhatsApp as the natural gateway. WhatsApp's most powerful attribute in this context is that citizens already use it daily, so the step from messaging a family member to messaging the government is minimal, provided the government's interface is designed to meet citizens where they are rather than requiring them to adapt to government system logic. India is also one of the largest markets for voice notes globally, meaning citizens are already comfortable with voice interaction on the same platform being used for governance. The group argued that voice-enabled AI chatbots in regional languages should therefore be the default mode of interaction for government WhatsApp bots, with text as a secondary option rather than the other way around.

Assam's context: building confidence before capability. Unlike southern Indian states, where two decades of IT-sector growth have shaped administrative culture, North-eastern states present a different starting point. Formal literacy is not the barrier — confidence and familiarity with digital systems are. Critically, this applies not only to citizens but to government officers themselves, making it as much an institutional behaviourial challenge as a design one. Voice-first interfaces in Assamese, Bodo and other regional languages can address the citizen-facing dimension. But building officer confidence in the safety and reliability of the platform

requires a different kind of investment, one grounded in demonstrated implementation, peer learning and patient relationship-building rather than technical explanations.

Community resource persons as a trusted bridge. The National Rural Livelihoods Mission's community resource persons are women from within communities who serve as the practical link between government programmes and rural households. These individuals are somewhat more digitally literate than the general population and already use digital tools including chatbots for training and capacity-building within their network. The group discussed how WhatsApp-based government services could be channelled through this existing network, with community resource persons assisting citizens in accessing services on the platform. This approach combines the reach of WhatsApp with the trust and familiarity of a known human intermediary, a model that technology alone cannot replicate for the most marginalised communities.

Design for the hardest-to-reach citizen. A clear principle that ran through the discussion is that digital governance should be designed for the most constrained user, not the average one. If a system cannot be used by a woman in a rural area who speaks a regional language, has a basic smartphone and has never navigated a digital service before, it is not a system built for everyone. Intelligent governance means making this the starting point and not something to be fixed after the easier users have already been served.

6. Data Integration, Identity and the Ask Only Once Principle

A recurring aspect discussed was that citizens are asked to provide the same information, such as name, address, Aadhaar number, photograph, certificates, etc., every time they interact with a different department or apply for a different scheme. The group agreed that this is not a technology problem but an institutional design failure that digital platforms can help fix.

The departmental silo and the re-entry problem. India's central and state governments maintain separate data systems across dozens of departments, each with its own logic for what it holds and how it is structured. As a result, a citizen who has provided his/her caste certificate to one department must provide it again to a second and again to a third. The friction compounds across a lifetime of government interactions. A key aspiration of intelligent governance is that once a citizen has provided any piece of information to any part of government, no other department should ever ask for it again.

Central data repositories as the architectural solution. One state described building an on-premise central data repository during the design of its WhatsApp citizen services platform. When a citizen interacts with the platform for the first time,

the data they provide is captured once and stored in a state-owned repository. Subsequent interactions, across any department, draw from this repository and pre-populate form fields without requiring re-entry. Critically, the data belongs entirely to the state and is stored on state infrastructure. The group endorsed this as the right architectural direction: a citizen data layer that stores information submitted during any interaction and makes it available, with appropriate consent, to all subsequent service requests.

Aadhaar as the selective auto-population layer. Multiple participants discussed the integration of Aadhaar-based authentication into WhatsApp service flows, so that basic fields such as name, photograph, date of birth and address are auto-populated once the citizen authenticates. Aadhaar's selective data sharing model, in which only the fields required for a specific service are shared rather than the full identity record, aligns well with the principle of minimal data collection. For citizens, this addresses the particularly painful requirement to upload photographs at precise aspect ratios and within file size limits that their devices cannot always produce.

Linking financial and social data for targeted delivery. One state described an ongoing initiative to integrate two databases: its financial database covering citizen income, transactions and transfer history and its social information platform covering household composition, caste, occupation and vulnerability. When linked through Aadhaar as a common identifier, the combined dataset would enable the state to identify precisely which citizens are eligible for which schemes. The group saw this financial-social data integration as the near-term frontier for states that have already built their citizen service platforms and are ready to move toward genuinely anticipatory governance.

7. Trust, Data Sovereignty and Institutional Confidence

The discussion addressed the concern that sits at the centre of adoption decisions in many states: what happens to citizen data when services are delivered through a platform owned by a global technology company?

Data sovereignty is the single biggest concern in some states. Participants from several states said that officials and political leaders worry that citizen data will leave India when services run on WhatsApp. In some states, this concern alone has been enough to stall adoption.

WhatsApp does not store the data; the state owns it. Meta representatives explained the architecture clearly. All communication on WhatsApp is end-to-end encrypted. Meta does not store message content. When a state government deploys citizen services through WhatsApp, the data generated, such as service requests, transactions and demographic details, belongs entirely to the state. WhatsApp's role

is limited to moving data from one point to another. The state decides its own backup infrastructure and storage arrangements. The group urged that this architecture be communicated more directly and proactively to state leadership, particularly where trust concerns have slowed adoption.

State data centres may not be safer. One participant with direct responsibility for state data infrastructure offered a candid reassessment. State data centres, which face persistent cybersecurity attacks and often operate without properly functioning security operations centres, may in practice be less secure than Meta's global infrastructure, which implements comprehensive security mechanisms at scale. He acknowledged that this is a difficult message to deliver within the government, where keeping data within India's borders carries deep institutional and psychological weight regardless of the actual security position. The group recognised this gap between perception and reality but agreed that trust is built through visible, working implementations rather than through technical arguments.

The intermediary layer raises its own trust questions. The government does not always deal with Meta directly. It frequently works through business service partners (BSPs) and technology intermediaries. In these arrangements, how data is handled at each step, what the intermediary can access, store or use, creates a separate layer of trust concerns that transparency from Meta alone does not resolve. Participants flagged this as a design challenge that requires clarity about the full chain of implementation partners, not just the platform.

Direct engagement simplifies procurement and builds trust. One participant noted that when third-party vendors approach state governments to implement digital services, the procurement process requires competitive tendering which is a slow process that can delay or discourage adoption. However, when the platform provider itself engages directly with the state, the procurement pathway can be significantly faster and simpler. The group encouraged Meta to engage with state governments directly and early rather than relying solely on implementation partners. This direct engagement also builds the institutional relationship that underpins trust.

8. From Pilots to Population Scale: Dashboards, Readiness and Digital Literacy

As states move from early deployments to full-scale citizen service platforms, a set of challenges emerge that are not primarily technical. They are about measurement, institutional readiness and how quickly government systems adapt to new ways of working.

Dashboards need to be built for decision-makers, not just technical teams. Along with the analytics gap in current platforms, participants stressed that dashboards should not be built only for IT teams. They need to be simple and visual enough for Chief Ministers and senior administrators to use directly: officials who need to make strategic decisions about citizen services based on clear engagement data, not technical reports.

Digital readiness varies sharply across states. Southern Indian states, where two decades of IT sector growth have shaped the professional environment, have produced government officers who are, on average, more comfortable with digital systems. This is not about ability but about exposure and institutional culture. One participant noted that officers in southern states who entered service from non-technical backgrounds had acquired a deep technical understanding over the course of their careers. In other states, this has not happened as consistently. What works smoothly in Tamil Nadu or Karnataka may need significantly more hand-holding, demonstrated proof and relationship investment in North-eastern or central Indian states. Any deployment strategy needs to account for this difference rather than assume a uniform starting point.

Even one hesitant decision-maker can slow adoption for an entire department. Participants acknowledged that this is a familiar pattern across states. The most effective response is not technical persuasion but practical exposure, such as field visits to states where WhatsApp services are already working, dashboards designed for non-technical users and patient, relationship-based engagement that builds confidence over time.

Implementation timelines are shrinking as experience grows. A Meta representative noted that the first state-level WhatsApp governance deployment took roughly six months from start to launch. The most recent one took just one month. This compression reflects that the real barriers to adoption are not technical. They are institutional, behaviourial and relational and they become easier to address with each new deployment that generates lessons for the next.

9. Global Perspectives: India as a Governance Innovator

A perspective shared during the discussion, drawing on experience with government deployments across the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, challenged the conventional assumption that India looks abroad for best practice in digital governance.

India is leading, not following. The work being done by Indian state governments on WhatsApp is, through a panellist's viewpoint, the most innovative application of conversational platforms for governance anywhere in the world. Other governments are innovating on narrower pieces of the citizen engagement challenge. Indian

states are attempting a comprehensive, population-scale transformation, integrating hundreds of services under a single number, building proactive delivery models and designing for voice-first, multilingual populations. The conventional framing of India learning from global best practice needs to be inverted in this domain. India should be a lesson for the world, not the other way around.

Singapore as a design benchmark. The Singapore government was cited as the clearest international parallel for one of the core design principles discussed throughout the roundtable: that citizens should be able to contact the government once, in any channel and the system should route them to the right place automatically.

India's public sector is pushing Meta's global product development. Meta representatives made clear that the innovations demanded by Indian state governments, such as the single-number multi-service architecture, AI-enabled routing and voice-first interfaces, are capabilities that Meta had not previously built until Indian states pushed for them. The Government of Andhra Pradesh's request to consolidate all citizen services under one WhatsApp number was described as something Meta would not have developed on its own. This makes the relationship genuinely reciprocal: India is both the most demanding and the most innovative partner in Meta's global government portfolio.

Emerging Consensus and Pathways Forward

Here are a few areas of convergent thinking that emerged that could inform future action.

Theme	Emerging Consensus
India as a Governance Innovator	The work being done by Indian state governments on WhatsApp-based citizen services is, by global comparison, the most ambitious application of conversational platforms for governance anywhere in the world. India's demands, including the single-number multi-service architecture, AI-enabled routing and voice-first interfaces, have directly shaped Meta's global product roadmap. The conventional framing of India learning from global best practice should be inverted in this domain. India's federal structure, combined with its digital public infrastructure, positions it to lead globally on intelligent governance.
AI-Enabled Service Discovery	Menu-driven navigation of citizen services on WhatsApp has reached its structural limit. When a single state bot hosts

	hundreds of services, requiring citizens to navigate departmental hierarchies is a design failure. AI-enabled natural language interaction, where the citizen types or speaks their needs and the system routes them automatically to the correct service, should be the default architecture for all new state deployments and the priority migration target for existing menu-driven bots. Telangana's MeeSeva demonstrates that this is technically feasible today. Meta should work with all partner states to accelerate this migration. The full citizen journey, from service discovery through application through payment, should be able to be completed within a single WhatsApp thread. The platform already supports all major payment methods, including UPI, within the conversation. States should design service flows so that citizens never need to leave the chat to complete a transaction.
Voice-First, Vernacular by Default	Voice-based, multilingual AI should be a design default, not an add-on. India's high voice note usage on WhatsApp makes this immediately viable. For the roughly 70 per cent of citizens in rural areas and for the millions of women in self-help group networks with limited formal education, voice interaction in regional languages is the only realistic path to digital inclusion. AI-assisted voice form-filling, where the system asks questions conversationally and populates the application on the citizen's behalf, should be integrated into every service flow as a standard feature.
Proactive Entitlement Delivery	The aspiration of proactive governance, where the state identifies eligible citizens and delivers benefits without requiring applications, is no longer theoretical. Karnataka's flood relief and scholarship disbursement models demonstrate working implementations. The prerequisite is interoperable databases linked through common identifiers such as Aadhaar. States should invest in building and connecting social registries, financial databases and departmental records as the foundational infrastructure for intelligent governance. Once benefits are delivered, citizens need to know. WhatsApp is the natural channel for confirming that a payment has been credited or a new

	entitlement is available, closing the information loop without requiring citizens to check a portal.
Emergency Services Integration	The unified state bot model is particularly valuable for emergency services. Integrating women's safety alerts, ambulance dispatch with live location sharing and police assistance into the same WhatsApp number that citizens use for routine services eliminates the need for separate emergency applications and ensures the channel is already familiar. The argument is simple: citizens are more likely to have a government service number already saved on their phones than a dedicated emergency app. States should prioritise onboarding emergency services as a high-impact, high-visibility addition to their platforms.
The Ask Only Once Principle	Citizens should never be asked to submit information that the government already holds, or that they have previously provided to any part of the government. Central data repositories, built on premises and owned by the state, combined with Aadhaar-based selective auto-population, should eliminate repetitive data entry across services. Every state deploying WhatsApp-based citizen services should build a citizen data layer that stores information submitted during any interaction and makes it available, with consent, to subsequent requests. Document upload friction, file size limits and aspect ratio requirements should be resolved by the platform, not imposed on the citizen. The goal is that once a citizen has provided any piece of information to any part of the government, no other department should ever ask for it again.
Data Sovereignty and Trust Building	Institutional resistance rooted in data sovereignty concerns remains the single biggest barrier to WhatsApp adoption for governance in several states. Meta should invest in clear, proactive communication of WhatsApp's encryption architecture and data ownership model directly to state leadership. Peer learning exchanges between states that have deployed and states considering deployment are more effective than presentations. Where services are delivered through business service partners rather than directly, Meta

	should ensure transparency about what data intermediaries can access, store or use at each step in the chain. Meta should also prioritise direct engagement with state governments, rather than relying solely on implementation partners, to reduce procurement friction and build institutional confidence through relationships, not just demonstration.
Analytics and Outcome Measurement	The governing metric for WhatsApp-based citizen services should be the quality of end-to-end completion, not the volume of services listed. States are tracking how many services are onboarded but not whether citizens are completing them or who is being reached. Dashboards should capture rural versus urban usage, individual service frequency, drop-off points in service flows and the share of transactions completed end-to-end on WhatsApp without fallback to physical offices or call centres. These dashboards should be designed for senior administrators and Chief Ministers, not just technical teams, so that strategic decisions about citizen services are grounded in clear engagement data.
Cross-State Learning and Rapid Deployment	The time required to deploy a state WhatsApp citizen services platform has reduced from six months for the first implementation to one month for the most recent. This acceleration is driven by accumulated learning. The group endorsed the creation of structured forums for cross-state knowledge exchange, where states that have deployed share implementation playbooks, design decisions, adoption data and lessons learned with states preparing to launch. Structured peer learning is the fastest route to closing the adoption gap between leading and lagging states.
SHG and Community Networks as Last-Mile Partners	Existing community networks, particularly self-help group systems with embedded digital tools and trained community resource persons, offer a distribution backbone for proactive government outreach to marginalised populations that complements WhatsApp's reach with the trust and familiarity of a known human intermediary. State governments and Meta should explore structured partnerships with civil society organisations operating these networks, using WhatsApp as

	the communication layer between government, community workers and the households they serve. This combination of platform reach and human trust is the most effective model for extending digital governance to the last mile.

Closing Note

The Smart Governance: Reactive Service Delivery to Intelligent Public Systems Roundtable brought together state government officials leading digital citizen services, the National Rural Livelihoods Mission official and Meta's WhatsApp team to examine how conversational AI can reshape how the state and the citizen interact. The discussion drew on real implementations, from Karnataka's proactive flood relief delivery to Assam's first steps toward a WhatsApp-based governance stack and was grounded throughout in practical experience rather than aspiration.

The progress is real. States like Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha have shown that WhatsApp can work as a comprehensive citizen services platform at a population scale. The shift from menu-driven bots to AI-enabled natural language interaction is underway. Proactive governance models, where the state delivers benefits without waiting for applications, are already operational in Karnataka and offer a working blueprint for others.

The barriers are equally real. Departmental databases remain siloed in most states. Analytics infrastructure has not kept pace with service deployment. Institutional concerns about data sovereignty continue to slow adoption in states that stand to benefit most. And the hardest challenge, reaching the poorest, least digitally familiar and most marginalised citizens, requires that voice, vernacular and simplicity be built in from the start, not added later.

What emerged clearly from the discussion is that the foundational pieces are in place. The digital public infrastructure exists. Political commitment at the highest levels of multiple state governments is evident. The platform capabilities, AI-enabled routing, voice interfaces, embedded payments and multilingual support, are ready to deploy. What remains is the institutional work: building the data integration that enables proactive governance, designing for the most constrained user rather than the most capable one and building trust through demonstrated implementation rather than assurances.

The participants left with a shared understanding. The next phase of digital governance in India will not be measured by how many services are on a platform but by whether that platform makes it genuinely easier for the most vulnerable citizens to access what the state owes them. India has the infrastructure, the reach

and the ambition. The task now is to deliver on that promise, with design that puts the citizen first, data systems that talk to each other and a pace of deployment that matches the scale of the opportunity.

Roundtable Participants

Name	Designation	Organisation
Shri Ravikiran T, IFS	Commissioner	Electronic Services Delivery (ESD)Govt of Telangana
Dr. Monika Bhutunguru, IPS	Deputy Secretary (Rural Livelihoods), Ministry of Rural Development	Govt of India
Shri Surendra Kumar Meena, IAS	Executive Director, Centre for Modernizing Government Initiatives	Govt of Odisha
Shri Ashwani Kumar, IAS	Director, Directorate of ITEC	Govt of Assam
Dr. Shreevyas H M	Director, Karnataka AI Cell, Centre for e-Governance	Govt of Karnataka
Smt. Kaiya Wadell	Director, Government & Social Impact, Asia-Pacific	Meta
Smt. Divya Khemani	Strategic Programs and Partnerships	Meta

This synthesis was prepared under the Chatham House Rule. The views and observations recorded reflect the collective discussion. No statement is attributed to any individual participant or organisation.