CITIZENS' REPORT CARDS ON PUBLIC SERVICES: BANGALORE, INDIA[*]

I.   Abstract

The Citizens' Report Card in Bangalore (Southern India) was a civil society initiative undertaken in 1993 to monitor government services in terms of efficiency and accountability. The exercise gathered citizen feedback on performance of public agencies and disseminated the findings to the citizenry, thus exerting public pressure on the agencies to initiate reforms. A seven-point rating scale facilitated quantification of citizen satisfaction levels with regard to service delivery, dimensions of corruption, staff behavior, and so forth.

The report card findings were widely publicized through the media. Senior public officials were brought together for initiating discussions and addressing issues exposed through these findings through workshops and seminars, which saw active participation from civic groups. Furthermore, workshops and meetings organized specifically with local civic groups and NGOs created a common platform for these bodies to discuss and raise priority issues for reform. Increased public awareness on government inefficiencies and other related concerns triggered the formation of more than 100 civic groups in different parts of India, as well as the launch of many citizen-state campaigns for transparent public management.

The report card exercise was repeated in 1999, to provide a comparative assessment of the progress since 1993. A partial improvement in some areas was noted. Four out of eight public agencies surveyed had initiated steps to resolve customer dissatisfaction. However, concrete improvements in the quality of services will be only noted over a period of time.

II.   Background

Bangalore is one the largest cosmopolitan areas of India. A major center for software and industrial output, the city is also accredited as the "Silicon Valley" of India. However, in the early 1990s, the city was characterized by inadequate and low-quality public services. Electricity, water, garbage removal, and other municipal services were unreliable and, for most citizens, difficult to access. Roads, parks, and other civic amenities were poorly maintained. New telephone connections took years to actualize. Corruption was rampant and an accepted norm to acquiring basic and sometimes "free" services.

In 1993, inspired by the private sector practice of conducting client satisfaction surveys in India, Dr. Samuel Paul and a small advisory group initiated the citizen report card exercise in Bangalore (this group officially registered as a nonprofit society called the Public Affairs Center (PAC) in 1994).[1] By highlighting citizen feedback of public services, the report cards were perceived to serve as social

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[1] The goal of PAC is to improve governance in India by strengthening civil society institutions in their interactions within the state. For further information see: www.pacindia.org.

accountability mechanisms that would generate awareness of the poor performance of service providers and stimulate them to take improvement actions. More specifically, the initiative sought user response to the following questions:

- How satisfactory are the public services?
- Which aspects of the services are satisfactory and which are not?
- What are the direct and indirect costs of acquiring these services?

PAC has used a mix of grant support and fees earned from professional services to support its activities. Project-specific grants have been raised from agencies such as the National Foundation of India and the Ford Foundation. General funding support has also come from the corporate sector and individual citizens. PAC has not sought any grants from the Government of India.

First Report Card (1993)

The first report card surveyed 480 middle-income and 330 low-income (slum dwellers) households. The city was stratified into two categories according to the age of the localities. Six localities were selected, and within each locality households that had interacted with any public service provider in the preceding six months were chosen. The study did not enlist a predetermined set of agencies: rather, it covered agencies with the maximum user interaction rate.[2] Subsequently, eight agencies were selected: the Electricity Board, Regional Transport Office (RTO), the Water and Sewerage Board, Bangalore City Corporation (BCC), Telecom, Public Sector banks and hospitals, and Bangalore Development Authority (BDA).[3]

A pre-tested questionnaire was used to elicit user responses on the overall satisfaction of service delivery, along with other dimensions, such as: (a) staff behavior; (b) number of visits required to complete a task; (c) frequency of problem resolution; and (d) information provided.[4] A seven-point rating scale (7 for "highly satisfied" and 1 for "least satisfied") enabled quantification of responses. The responses were transferred into a computerized database and analyzed using a software package. The end product was a set of scores that enabled ranking and comparing the public ratings of agency services. The ratings were shared with senior agency officials and publicized among the population.

Second Report Card (1999)

The report card exercise was repeated in 1999 and covered 1,339 middle-income households and 839 slum dwellers.[5] This report card surveyed the same agencies as in the 1993 study and applied similar methodology for the selection of representative

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[2] The fieldwork was conducted by Gallup MBA India Pvt. Ltd., a market research agency. For more information, see www.gallup.com
[3] In the survey of the poor households, Bangalore Transport, BDA, and Regional Transport Office were excluded while primary schools were brought in.
[4] The kinds of questions asked of the poorer households were relatively different from those addressed to the middle-income households as, for this section of society, the availability of services was itself a problem. Questions, among others, pertained to their highest-priority needs, and the accessibility of basic services such as water, electricity, and public transport systems, to name a few. Primary schools were included, while services such as the RTO and BDA were excluded.
[5] Between these two report cards, the PAC had carried out several report cards in different cities of India.

samples. The findings were discussed with senior officials of service provider agencies (telephone, water, electricity, and the municipality) through the medium of mini-report cards.[6] Citizen groups and NGOs were also involved in such discussions.

III. Impact/Results

General Findings

The 1993 report card revealed low levels of public satisfaction with the performance of service providers. The BDA had only 1 percent satisfied and 65 percent dissatisfied customers. Other agencies such as the Bangalore City Corporation , Electricity Board, Water and Sewerage Board and Telecom had only single-digit satisfaction figures. Corruption was widespread in almost all public agencies. A third of the urban poor surveyed had paid a bribe to public officials in the previous six months. Customer satisfaction in middle-income households was low in regard to public service aspects such as staff behavior, problem resolution rate, and number of visits made to the agency to get their work done. The situation was worse for the urban poor, who had to make multiple visits to agencies, were ill treated by public officials, and had a lower problem resolution rate (38 percent) than the middle-income households (57 percent).

For the report card in 1999, partial improvement in services such as the telephones and the hospitals was noted. However, overall citizen satisfaction remained low, with most of performers scoring less than 50 percent for satisfaction levels. People seemed even less satisfied with the way staff interacted with the clients. Bangalore Telecom, for instance, had the highest overall satisfaction rating of 67 percent, but this dropped sharply to 30 percent among a sub-sample of people who interfaced with agency personnel to solve a specific problem. The scale of corruption also increased during this period.

Response from Service Providers

Although no dramatic improvement in quality of service was witnessed between 1994 and 1999, attempts were made to respond to public dissatisfaction. In telephones, electricity, and water supply, bill collection was streamlined and new systems were introduced for the registration of routine breakdowns of service. The BCC initiated a joint program with local citizen groups and NGOs to improve civic services. With the assistance of PAC, BCC introduced a new grievance redress system. As a result, a new training and orientation program for the concerned officials was carried out.

The BDA, with assistance from PAC, prepared its own report card. This enabled BDA to compile feedback from its customers on the issue of corruption and identify weak areas in its service planning and delivery. As a follow-up action, a series of training workshops was organized for BDA managers and field officers. The agency's internal systems and practices were reviewed. Along with the BCC, BDA began to host a joint forum of NGOs and public agencies to consult on solving high-priority issues. The agency also initiated an organizational development program.

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[6] A mini-report card is a brief statement highlighting key indicators such as service quality, satisfaction, and other dimensions pertinent to each agency. The statement also highlights the agency's ranking in terms of factors such as satisfaction, corruption, and so forth, in comparison to other agencies.

Bangalore's two leading public hospitals, which rated very poorly in comparison to both nonprofit and for-profit hospitals, agreed to join a voluntary group in setting up "help desks" to assist patients and to train their staff to be more responsive and efficient. A local forum—Citizen Action Group (CAG)—along with PAC prepared a report card on Bangalore's public hospitals. The survey enabled compilation of feedback from poor patients on their experience with public, charitable, and private hospitals. This model was also replicated at the state level for Karnataka's Health Department.[7]

Other Results

By the time the second report card was released, the new Chief Minister of Karnataka had formed the Bangalore Agenda Task Force (BATF). This group brought together prominent city residents (industrialists and civil society members) for the purpose of improving the city's quality of services and infrastructure. The BATF instituted a report card on problems facing citizens and agencies. It also initiated steps to introduce new accounting systems and practices in the BCC. A system for the "self-assessment" of property taxes has been set-up.[8] Taxpayers have the option of self-assessing their taxes or indemnifying the same at the old rate. Nearly half of the property owners in Bangalore have responded to the self-assessment scheme. The scheme has brought transparency, speed, and simplicity to an otherwise corrupt and arbitrary process.

The report card findings, following heavy media coverage, substantially contributed to raising public awareness on issues such as quality of service delivery, corruption levels, and so forth This has led to the formation of active civic groups that are keen to effect reform for improved governance. From 30 such groups present in the city before the 1993 exercise, the number has grown to 200 in 2003.

The report card exercise has been replicated in other Indian cities such as Chennai, Pune, Ahmedabad, Baroda, Calcutta, and Mumbai.[9] Countries like the Philippines, Vietnam, and Ukraine have adopted this model for the purpose of ensuring accountability in public agencies.

IV.   Key Elements of Empowerment

Information

For both of the report cards, the key findings were publicized through the media. Many newspapers and magazines prominently displayed these findings and highlighted the issue of corruption in public services. In 1994, the country's premier daily, *The Times of India*, ran a weekly feature for two months focusing on one report card finding at a time. Campaigns undertaken by PAC, sometimes in collaboration with civic groups, were brought into the public domain through the media. The

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[7] Bangalore is the capital of the State of Karnataka (Southern India).

[8] Under this system, instead of tax inspectors arbitrarily deciding on the levy of property tax on citizens (who are kept ignorant of the guidelines and methods the officers use), the citizens follow easy-to-understand and verifiable criteria and work out the tax due on their own. Guidelines and procedures for resolving grievances are also clearly stated and information is widely disseminated through the media.

[9] The exercises in these cities were undertaken by PAC in collaboration with local NGOs.

media's involvement thus helped strengthen public awareness about various issues and options pertinent to people's daily lives.

Dissemination of the report card findings also took place through seminars and meetings in different parts of the city. After the first report card, a series of "open-house" meetings was organized in the city for citizen groups who were mostly unaware of each other's existence. Issues pertaining to property taxes, traffic control, and public interest litigation, along with other civic issues and problems of common concern, were addressed.

Inclusion/Participation

The following mechanisms were employed to facilitate public participation in the exercise:

- Dissemination of findings through meetings and seminars that were attended by local activists in civic affairs, representatives of residents' associations, and NGOs.
- Public meetings facilitating interaction of public officials with citizen groups. For instance, in case of the second report card, a public function to bring together the major agencies and the public at large was organized. This enabled the assembled citizens to directly question the heads of public agencies on civic issues and the proposed steps to resolve them.
- Agencies such as the Electricity Board, BCC, and BDA held a series of meetings with residents' associations and NGOs to gather suggestions for ways to improve their services and to test out the feasibility of new reform measures.

Agencies responded to the suggestions with varying levels of improvements. Some agencies attempted to systematize the process of collecting feedback. Subsequent surveys of the same agencies noted improvements in delivery but little impact on corruption.

Accountability

The report card facilitated quantification of public feedback on dimensions such as corruption, staff behavior, and other qualitative attributes. Contrary to isolated complaints, these scores highlighted patterns of perceptions on the part of the public about agency performance. Such data gave organized citizen groups the kind of information they needed to hold public agencies responsible for their actions.

Dissemination of findings through the media generated huge public outcry and stimulated civil society to put pressure on local governments to improve performance. Agency leaders admitted that most of their responses were the result of such publicity and the subsequent pressure of citizen groups. Many officials now view report cards as a guide to better delivery of services and greater public accountability.

The meetings organized with agency heads for the distribution and discussion of mini-report cards drew active participation from concerned officials. These meetings forced the participants to think about ways of improving their staff responsiveness.

Local Organizational Capacity

The report card exercise motivated several civic groups to combine forces and demand action from public agencies. Information dissemination and the organization of meetings to educate these groups succeeded in engaging the public in action. Training workshops were specifically organized to build the capacity of civil society institutions to use tools such as report cards for systematic evaluation of the work of service agencies. The result was the undertaking of several state-citizen initiatives. One of the prominent ventures—the Swabhimana Initiative—is illustrated below:

Box 1: Swabhimana ("Self-esteem")—A Citizen-State Forum for a Clean, Green, and Safe Bangalore

This forum constituted an informal network of city officials and nongovernmental groups who met on a periodic basis to resolve priority problems. It conducted several consultations with municipal corporation officials and resident groups on a range of issues. Swabhimana has also worked on various grassroots initiatives in the city. The forum is recognized as a nonpartisan representative of citizen groups and NGOs.[10]

V.   Issues and Lessons

Challenges

Citizens' Report Card seems to have had no influence in bringing down the corruption levels among public agencies. Although the proportion of urban poor who had paid bribes to officials declined from 32 percent in 1993 to 25 percent in 1999, the average amount per case went up, from US$8 (approximately) to US$26 (approximately). For middle-income households, the number of people paying bribes to public officials, increased by 50 percent and the average amount paid per case went up by 100 percent.

The report card model did not take into account the feedback of commercial and industrial enterprises, primary users of public services. The apparent reason for excluding these bodies was that they are well organized and have the requisite power to put pressure on the authorities whenever required. However, their feedback would have made the report more comprehensive and complete.

In the report card, no adjustment mechanism was adopted to even out the differential impact of citizen expectations. As respondents have individual perceptions of service quality and satisfaction, they may have given different scores to the same quality of service.

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[10] Further Links: http://www.pacindia.org/default.asp?DocID=50&channelId=28&Tablename=document

Key Factors for Success

- When civil society members or institutions (citizen groups, NGOs, the press, and so forth) are empowered with relevant tools and information, they can play a useful role in monitoring the effectiveness of public service providers and enforcing accountability for improvements in service. However, immediate improvements and responses from all agencies should not be expected. Agency leaders need time and capacity to internalize the report card findings and design interventions commensurate with the issues highlighted. Also, politically driven systemic reforms from within agencies may require some time to materialize. In this context, dissemination of report card findings can mobilize interested citizen groups to keep the issue of accountability alive in the public domain.

- Implementation of the report card should be succeeded with appropriate follow-up actions that need to be institutionalized at the civil society and NGO levels. Such actions, possibly involving a coalition of grassroots, research, advocacy, and media organizations, need to be planned and structured at the outset of report card initiatives.

- Corruption is a deep-rooted problem that has no quick-fix solutions. Reforming this sector is far more difficult and time-consuming than it is for other sectors. Technical enhancements such as training and the introduction of better systems may help marginally but may not be successful in rooting out corrupt habits. It is also necessary for this reform agenda to be pushed by committed agency heads. Additionally, the incentive structure needs to be modified to make corrupt practices less attractive, which usually requires changes in the organizational culture of the agency and of the wider institutional context.

- Report cards should not be viewed as a one-time exercise, but rather should be repeated every year or on a regular basis, depending upon the urgency of the problems and the availability of resources. Periodic exercises at regular intervals may help agency leaders to assess improvement or deterioration in their services and may also influence policy decisions.

- Most public service providers and regulators, especially in developing countries, are monopolies that lack motivation to be sensitive to citizen complaints or customer satisfaction. By systematically gathering and disseminating public feedback, report cards may serve as a "surrogate for competition" for such monopolies and thereby trigger corrective actions by the agencies.

- Citizens themselves need to play an active and continuing role in monitoring the services of direct concern to them. A major role of NGOs should be to educate citizens on their rights and responsibilities in relation to public services and other entitlements.

Outlook

The scorecard methodology has potential applications in many sectors and at different levels of public administration. The ability of PAC to create a wider impact depends on its ability to scale up the models in partnership with larger institutions. PAC's advocacy efforts to link up with civil society outside Bangalore have seen only limited success. Smaller advocacy groups have been interested in forming such

partnerships but have lacked the capacity. Larger NGOs have not shown any interest. PAC needs to strengthen its team by augmenting internal managerial and leadership skills so that activities can be outsourced and wider networks can be built.

VI.   Further Information: References and World Wide Web Resources

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Web Links

Home Page of the Public Affairs Center, Bangalore. URL: www.pac.org