

# Enhancing Public Accountability at the Cutting Edges

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## 1. *The Challenge*

There is an urgent need to improve the accountability of governments and service providers to citizens. Though the state in India has made many impressive strides in expanding physical access of citizens to basic public service infrastructure there is mounting dissatisfaction among citizens on the delivery of these services, lack of effective access to services, poor quality and reliability of services, hidden costs and weak accountability mechanisms. Before we proceed further on the issue of low levels of accountability and responsiveness in public services, it is necessary to understand the context in which they operate<sup>2</sup>. First of all, the state has traditionally been the dominant in this area, and often the sole provider of public services in India. The downside of this 'monopoly power' is that users of most public services do not have the option to 'exit' from one supplier to another. It also creates a pronounced tendency on the part of the service providers to withhold information from the customers thus creating huge information gaps that makes it difficult for the customers or users of the services to demand accountability.

Second, there is little evidence that those in authority who are charged with enforcing public accountability are always effective and committed to this task. The absence of market competition has not been compensated for by any other institutional mechanism to ensure efficient service delivery. Traditional mechanisms such as public audit of government expenditure and legislative oversight focus only on a review of inputs. Expenditures are audited to see whether proper procedures and norms have been adhered to. While this is an aspect of accountability, it does not tell us anything about how well the money was spent. This is because very little attention is given to the outputs and outcomes of the inputs. The problem is exacerbated by the difficulties in measuring outputs and in monitoring field level activities. Legislative oversight has been blunted by the vastness of the scope of services and the lack of information available to the legislators. An even more disturbing problem is the collusion between service providers and those responsible for monitoring their performance. The internal working and decision making of public agencies cannot easily be monitored or even observed by those outside the system. The scope for the pursuit of

### The 4 D's....

- **Deficit of Alternatives** – Lack of exit options
- **Deficit of Information** – Lack of awareness on rights & entitlements
- **Deficit of Participation** – Narrow institutional spaces for engagement
- **Deficit of Accountability** – Weak monitoring and oversight mechanisms

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<sup>2</sup> Paul, S 2002, *Holding the State to Account: Citizen Feedback in Action*, Books for Change, Bangalore.

parochial and self-serving interests and for corruption is considerable under the circumstances.

Third, citizens—who directly or indirectly pay for all public services—are seldom able to engage in sustained collective action to demand increased public accountability from the service providers they deal with. There is an implicit assumption that once people elect a government, it is for the latter to enforce accountability on all service providers. Perhaps an even more important reason for this attitude of citizens is that their motivation to engage in collective action is usually weak. The fact that the severity of problems people face concerning public services generally tend to vary from day to day and from household to household shows that sustaining collective action is difficult even when a group is able to initiate action at some point in time. Some people may not invest time and energy for collective action as they feel they could get a ‘free ride’ from the success of the efforts of others in any case. This is a major reason why the incentives for collective action are weak except in certain critical situations.

Fourth, the legal framework of the country can be a barrier to improved public accountability. Administrators typically try to work within the framework of the laws and regulations of their organisations. Accounts get audited because a law requires them to do so. Investments are made according to the laws and regulations governing the organisation. If the law is silent on the standards and other attributes of services, provider agencies are likely to pay less attention to them.

Under these circumstances, the brunt of deficiencies in service, leave “poor people vulnerable to rudeness, humiliation and inhuman treatment by both private and public agents of the state<sup>3</sup>”, even when they seek services they are entitled to under the law of the land. The difficulties in accessing services are aggravated by the physical and social environment that the poor live in. These experiences of the poor reflect the inadequacy and difficulties encountered by the poor. On the other hand, these experiences also reflect more basic realities of state-citizen relationship beyond the service in question – on the manner in which the poor are organized as citizens, their relationship and mechanisms of interface with the state, and the changing character of the state.

Given this highly disabling environment, what are the practical ways to use ‘voice and participation’ to change the highly disabling ambience of public service delivery? Increasing opportunities for citizens’ voice and participation can create powerful incentives for change in one major direction: when competition is absent, as in the case of most public goods, popular voice can reduce information asymmetries which can challenge service providers to perform better and lower transaction costs.<sup>4</sup> When low incentives and weak monitoring combine to produce inefficient public services, voice mechanisms can inform public officials of the problems and act as pressure forces for demanding improvements.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Narayan, D., Patel, R., Schafft, K., Rademacher, A. and Koche-Schulte, S., 2000, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?*, Oxford University Press, New York

<sup>4</sup> Paul, S 1998, ‘Making Voice Work: The Report Card on Bangalore’s Public Services’, *Policy Research Working Paper no. 1921*, The World Bank, Washington DC.

<sup>5</sup> Dreze, J and Amartya Sen 1999, ‘Public Action and Social Inequality’, in Barbara Harriss-White and Sunil Subramanian (Eds), *Illfare in India: Essays on India’s Social Sector in Honour of S. Guhan*, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

### **The accountability conundrum**

- Governments spend on the wrong goods and people – **Budget Allocation Problem**
- Resources fail to reach service providers or users - **Expenditure Tracking Problem**
- Weak incentives for effective service delivery - **Problem of Monitoring/Accountability**
- Demand-side constraints - **Problem of Participation/Awareness - VOICE**

## **2. Exploring the potency of Citizen Feedback**

Citizen feedback is a cost-effective way for a government to find out whether its services are reaching the people, especially the poor. Users of a public service can tell the government a lot about the quality and value of a service. However, there is a dominant tendency among policy makers and service leaders to neglect this critical input while designing and delivering services. It was against this disabling background that Citizen Report Cards emerged as an “experiment” 15 years back in the city of Bangalore, India.

### **2.1 Citizen Report Card: The Context**

Bangalore, the capital of the State of Karnataka, is one of India’s large cosmopolitan cities, with a current population of around 6.8 million. The city expanded very rapidly since the 1980s, putting immense pressure on public service providers to cope with increased demand for essential services. The city’s services deteriorated significantly between the late 80’s and mid 90’s, after which major changes and improvements took place.

At the root of the problems in Bangalore was the rapid growth of the city, from a population of 1.2 million in 1961 to 4.1 million in 1991. Although the local government, called the Bangalore City Corporation, with an elected Mayor and Council, and a large complement of civil servants, was mandated to provide services such as solid waste disposal, maintenance of roads, permissions for erecting new buildings, etc., other services such as drinking water, public transport, electricity, security and traffic management were provided by separate agencies set up by the State Government. Urban planning and expansion of housing were facilitated by yet another agency. Annex 1 gives the list of key service providers in Bangalore.

By the early nineties, the situation in the city was not only one of inadequate and low quality public services, but also of a sense of helplessness among ordinary people about

resolving such problems. Electricity, water, garbage removal, and other essential services were both unreliable and difficult to access. People waited for years to get new telephone connections. Roads were in bad shape, especially in residential areas. Pedestrian sidewalks, parks and other civic amenities were poorly maintained. There was a widespread impression that it was difficult to get assistance from service providers without bribes.

There was no institutional mechanism for coordinating the activities of different service providers until 1999. Each agency formulated policies and plans depending on its priorities and resources. Administrative systems provided little room for direct consultation with city residents, to establish priorities, plan or monitor services.

Slum dwellers, who accounted for a large proportion of the urban poor and approximately 25% of city residents, were a fast growing population. Their problems were similar to those faced by slum dwellers in other cities: civic agencies were reluctant to provide services without a land title, the high density of habitation placed pressure on the minimal infrastructure and subsidized services were needed, etc. Bangalore's slums were scattered across the city, and urban growth created pressure to move the slums.

The misery in the city was sustained by a sense of resignation among citizens. There were no loud protests or public agitations demanding an overall improvement in services. In retrospect, one could largely attribute the lack of corrective action by service providers to this deficit in collective action by city residents. There were very few neighborhood associations in Bangalore to take up civic issues. Most city based NGOs directed their attention to specific segments such as children, women and slum dwellers. The poor level of organization in civil society matched the low level of concern among activists and leading citizens to fight against the dismal public services in their own backyard.

It was against this disabling backdrop that a small citizens' group in Bangalore led by Dr. Samuel Paul, a distinguished academic and internationally renowned public sector expert, organised a public feedback exercise with some friends as a concerned citizen's response to the appalling quality of civic services. The survey was carried out by a supportive market research firm, Marketing and Business Associates, with survey costs met through local donations. The response this experiment evoked in both state and non-state arenas led to the formation of 'Public Affairs Centre' (PAC) in Bangalore as a national institute dedicated to improve the quality of governance in India in 1994. Over the past nine years, PAC has emerged as a major resource centre for stimulating public action through focused knowledge creation.

## **2.2 Citizen Report Card: The Concept**

Citizen Report Cards (CRCs) on public utilities, pioneered by PAC is now widely recognised as a powerful voice mechanism. Anchoring on the concept of user feedback, 'citizen report cards' provide a simple and widely replicable tool for improving transparency and public accountability. When citizens' voice provides an objective assessment of both qualitative and quantitative aspects of different public services, based on first-hand interactions with the agencies providing these services, it is possible to rank the agencies on the quality of performance. This 'report card' can then be used to stimulate collective action by citizens, and provide organisational leaders with an opportunity to design reforms and bring in a

strategic reorientation.<sup>6</sup> Experiences with report cards, both national and international, have amply demonstrated its potential for demanding more public accountability and providing a credible database to facilitate proactive civil society responses. In more practical terms, Citizen Report Cards give the following strategic inputs:

- a. *Provide benchmarks on access, adequacy and quality of public services as experienced by citizens:* Citizen Report Cards go beyond the specific problems that individual citizens face and place each issue in the perspective of other elements of service design and delivery, as well as a comparison with other services, so that a strategic set of actions can be initiated.
- b. *Provide measures of citizen satisfaction to prioritise corrective actions:* Citizen Report Cards capture citizens' feedback in clear, simple and unambiguous fashion by indicating their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. When this measure of citizen satisfaction or dissatisfaction is viewed from a comparative perspective, it gives very valuable information to prioritise corrective actions. For example, the most basic feedback a citizen may give about power supply is total dissatisfaction. To appreciate this feedback, it must be related to the ratings given to other services by the same person. For example, water supply may be rated worse than power supply. When these two pieces of information are compared, one can conclude that power supply may be a cause of dissatisfaction, but the priority for corrective action may be on water supply.
- c. *Provide indicators of problem areas in the delivery of public services:* Citizen Report Cards enquire into specific aspects of interaction between the service agency and the citizen, and seek to identify issues experienced by citizens in interfacing with the services. In more simple terms, Citizen Report Cards suggest that dissatisfaction has causes, which may be related to the quality of services enjoyed by citizens (like reliability of power supply, or availability of medicines in a public hospital); difficulties encountered while dealing with the agency to solve service related issues like excess billing or complaints of power supply breakdown.
- d. *Provide reliable estimates on corruption and other hidden costs:* Corruption, though widespread and rampant, often exists in the realm of anecdotes without any quantitative base. This 'subjectivity' of corruption has severely undermined both corrective and collective responses.
- e. *Provides a mechanism to explore citizens' alternatives for improving public services:* Citizen Report Cards go beyond collecting feedback on existing situations from citizens. They are also a means of testing out different options that citizens wish to exercise, individually or collectively, to tackle various problems. For example, Citizen Report Cards can provide information on whether citizens are willing to pay more for better quality of services or be part of citizens' bodies made responsible for managing garbage clearance in the locality.

A typical CRC study is organised along the following lines<sup>7</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> Gopakumar, K 1997, 'Public Feedback as an aid to Public Accountability: Reflections on an innovative approach', *Public Administration and Development*, vol. 17, pp. 281-82.

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive review of the Citizen Report Card methodology, refer to [www.citizenreportcard.com](http://www.citizenreportcard.com)

- Identification of issues through Focus Group Discussions
- Designing the survey instrument
- Identifying the scientific sample for the survey
- Survey by an independent agency
- Collection of qualitative data
- Placing the results in the public domain
- Advocacy and partnerships.

The increasing application of Report Cards reflects a growing awareness of the potency of empirical approaches to provide useful trigger mechanisms for mobilising effective and focused demand constituencies. Empirical approaches have also helped to quantify and give shape to many themes, which hitherto existed in the realms of the abstract (corruption being a good case in point).

### **2.3 The Bangalore Citizen Report Card Narratives (1994-2003)**

The Public Affairs Centre (PAC) in Bangalore has done pioneering work on CRCs over the past decade. The first report card on Bangalore’s public agencies in 1994 covered municipal services, water supply, electricity, telecom, and transport. Since then, PAC has brought out report cards on several other cities, rural services and also on social services such as health care. But since it has tracked services for a longer period in Bangalore, we shall refer to this experiment in detail.

A comparison of the citizen ratings of public service agencies in Bangalore over a decade is perhaps the only way to judge whether their services had improved significantly. The early responses of the agencies between the first two report cards were varied. Some agencies took reform initiatives while others did not. It was during the period between the second and third report cards that more concerted efforts towards reform took place. The evidence presented in Chart 1 shows that user satisfaction increased in both periods.

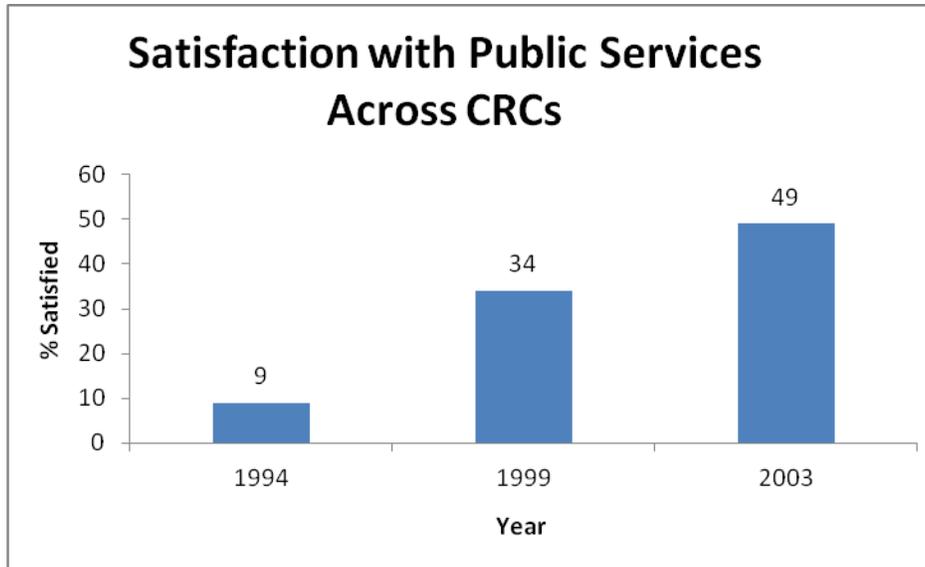
The comparison of user satisfaction presented below calls for a word of explanation. Comparability of data over time is a problem as changes invariably occur in the survey setting and the methods used. In the present case, the survey methodology used in the second and third report cards was fine tuned in the light of experience, especially with regard to the rating scale. To ensure comparability of the data between periods, the chart below uses the evidence from all respondents who had interacted with one agency or another. The data for all agencies are aggregated for each report card. For 2003, the column represents the proportion of users who are completely satisfied with a service. This is compared with the proportion of users in the upper end of the scale, namely, “very satisfied” and “satisfied”, in 1994 and 1999. A comparison of these categories with “completely satisfied” is defensible though the former slightly exaggerates the level of satisfaction in 1994 and 1999<sup>8</sup>. In other words, the data given against 2003 is a more

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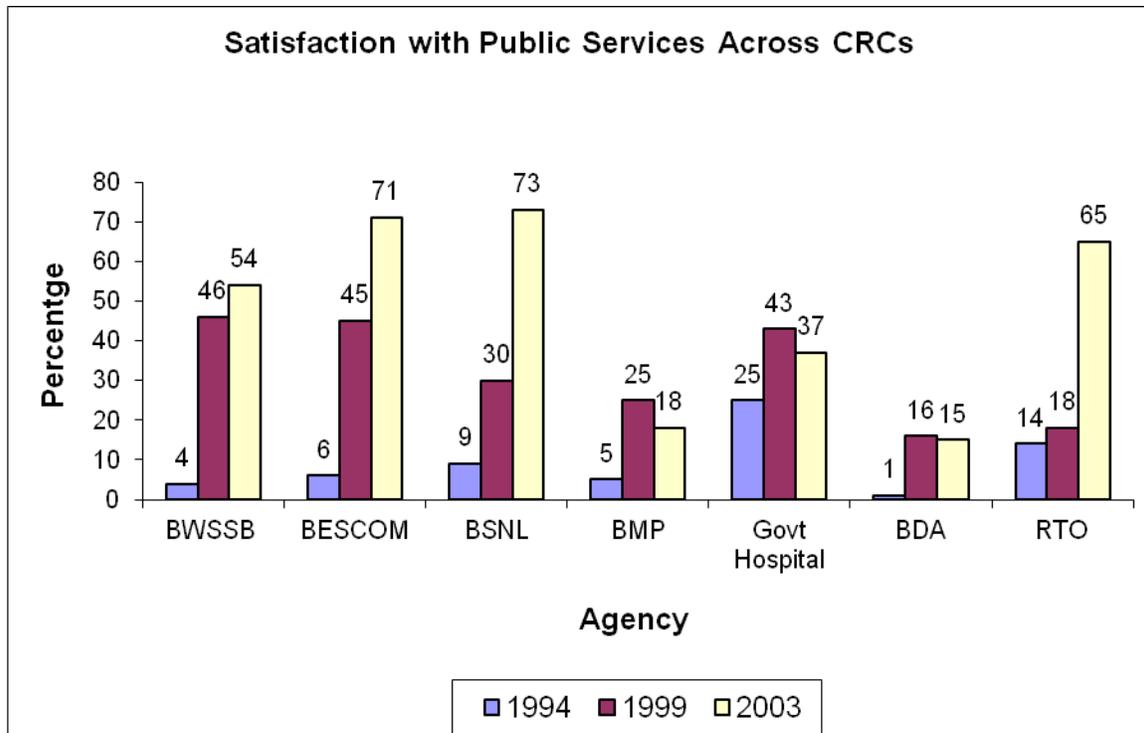
<sup>8</sup> This is because all those who come under “satisfied” may or may not be “completely satisfied”.

restrictive measure of user satisfaction. Despite this limitation, the chart shows that the average user satisfaction increased by over 40% between 1999 and 2003. Focus on the upper end of the scale is appropriate also because it sets a goal for the service provider to achieve, namely, giving complete or high satisfaction to the user.

*Chart 1*



*Chart 2*



Legend: BWSSB – Bangalore Water Supply & Sewerage Board; BESCOM – Bangalore Electricity Company; BSNL – Bangalore Telephone Company; BMP – Bangalore City Corporation; BDA – Bangalore Development Authority; and; RTO – Road Transport Authority

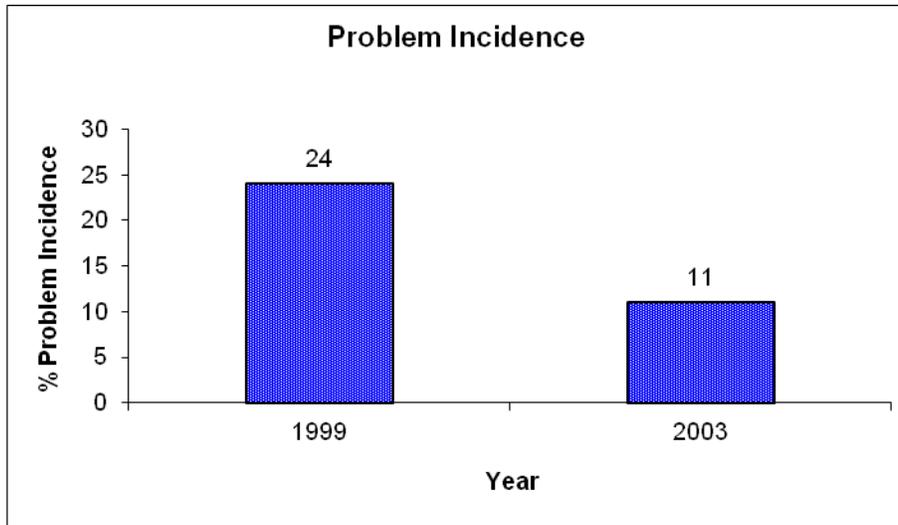
Chart 2 above presents the satisfaction ratings across the three CRCs. Here again, while the rating for 1994 and 1999 includes those users who interacted with service providers and are either very satisfied or satisfied, that for 2003 gives those who are completely satisfied. The chart shows that agencies have varied in terms of complete satisfaction. This probably reflects the complexity of the agency tasks and the nature of reforms attempted.

Chart 1 above clearly indicates a trend of across the board improvement over time in user satisfaction when all the agencies are taken together. Chart 2 shows that there are variations in the ratings across CRCs for agencies and they are not even. The usage of the restrictive measure in 2003 understates the extent of satisfaction. The improvement in rating would have been better if a less restrictive measure had been used. It is important to understand what lies behind this change. Does the improvement in satisfaction reflect real changes that might have occurred in the quality of services, responsiveness of the service providers, and efficiency of service delivery? Did the need for interaction with the agencies significantly decrease? What actions might have been taken by the government and its service providers to achieve such positive outcomes? The comparative charts below provide some answers to these questions.

**Problem incidence:** People are likely to be more satisfied when they have fewer problems in getting a service or while interacting with an agency. The extent to which users of services experience problems has come down in 2003 in comparison with 1999. (see Chart 3). Fewer problems mean fewer interactions with the agencies. This usually happens when

more people experience relatively more reliable or hassle free services. Since this aspect was not quantified in 1994, it is not possible to say whether the same pattern existed between 1994 and 1999.

**Chart 3**

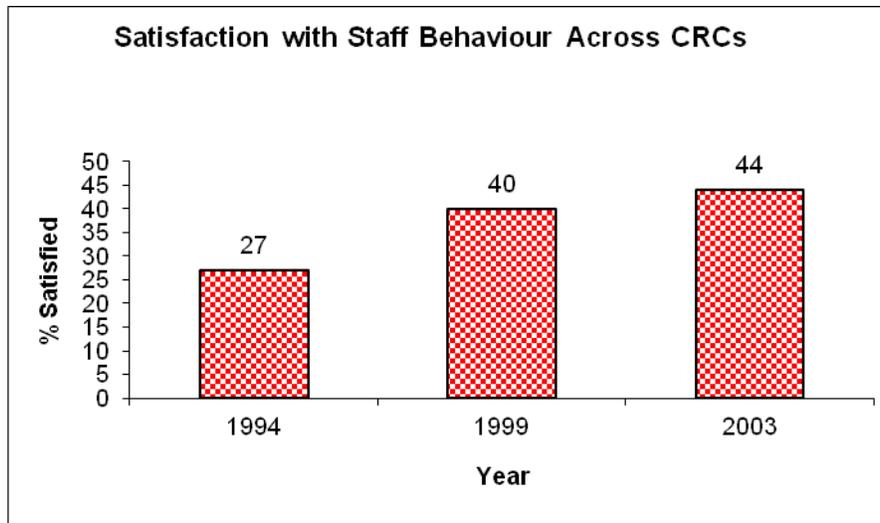


Reduction of problems is an important reason for improved satisfaction. It is likely that the reduction in the frequency of routine problems translates into fewer interactions with citizens, thereby reducing the scope for delay, harassment or corruption. The regularity and reliability of services have improved during the period, according to users. To quote two examples, additional data collected in the survey revealed that satisfaction with regularity of garbage clearance by City Corporation has gone up from 16% in 1999 to 75% in 2003, and that with accuracy of billing in the Water Board from 32% to 90%. The reduction in problems described above has been matched also by improvement in satisfaction with behaviour of staff<sup>9</sup> (see Chart 4).

**Chart 4**

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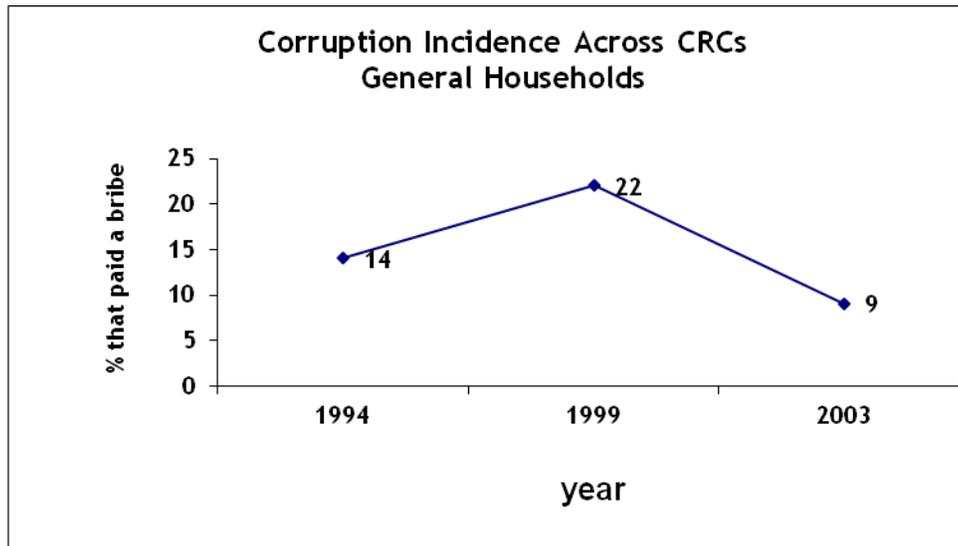
<sup>9</sup> The satisfaction rating of 44% in 2003 is an understatement as the measure used is more restrictive than that used for the earlier years, as explained above.



The chart above indicates a positive change in staff behaviour for all the agencies taken together. It is difficult to imagine that people who gave low ratings in the past to the same staff would applaud them now without valid reasons. While improved procedures have reduced the possibility of abuse of discretion, most agencies have invested also in training their staff. These efforts may have positively influenced the attitude and mindset of staff since 1999.

**Corruption:** An important question is whether service improvement has been accompanied by a reduction in corruption. Evidence on this is given in the chart below. Despite some improvement in the services, corruption seems to have increased between 1994 and 1999. But compared to the report card of 1999, the findings of CRC 2003 for general households show that corruption in the agencies has come down (chart 5). We suspect that this reflects a reduction in the bribes demanded and paid by people in routine transactions. Streamlining of procedures and systems and increased transparency may well have contributed to this outcome. Some examples of how this might have happened are given below. This does not imply that all pockets of corruption have been eliminated. In specialized areas such as building permits and approvals of various kinds, corruption may still be substantial, but this survey was not designed to unearth them. The findings definitely support the premise that simpler procedures and improved efficiency in routine operations such as self assessment of property tax by the City Corporation, simplified land transfer by the Urban Development Authority and the like, as well as measures such as IT enabled billing systems in BESCO (the Electricity Company), served to reduce harassment and extortion citizens faced in the late nineties.

*Chart 5*



### **3. From Political “brakes” to Reform “accelerators”: The New Paradigm**

Citizen Report Card emerged as a demand-side “voice” mechanism. However, over the years, it started to elicit slow but steady interest from political leaders. A good illustration of this transition is the social audit of public services in Delhi initiated by the Chief Minister of Delhi, Mrs. Sheila Dixit. In September 2005, the Chief Minister (Head of the Provincial Government) of Delhi Mrs. Sheila Dikshit invited the Public Affairs Foundation (PAF) to monitor the outcomes of key public services in Delhi, using citizen feedback on the service providers involved. The project was completed in September 2006 and the findings were presented before the media and officials on September 4, 2006. What made this case stand out was that the Chief Minister publicly announced the launch of this audit and also openly committed to disclose the findings to the public, irrespective of the nature of the results. The audit was modeled after the well known Citizen Report Cards, pioneered by Public Affairs Centre.

The National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi is a unique administrative set up with administrative controls spread across three sets of actors – the central government, an elected state (provincial) government and local (municipal) government. A reformist government headed by Mrs. Sheila Dikshit has been in power since 1998. During the last 5-6 years, huge investments have been committed to improve public infrastructure, followed by a wide range of reforms in public administration. Two major strands that stand out in the reform agenda are: (a) significant investments on public infrastructure (especially in improving mass transport, and provision of water) and (b) wide range of e governance applications (e.g., computerization of land registration, online grievance redress etc.) that have been implemented across the board to make public services more accessible, responsive and accountable.

The People's Audit covered 14165 respondents in Delhi and elicited focused feedback on user's experiences across nine public services viz.

- Provision of Drinking Water to the urban poor through water tankers operated by the Delhi Jal (Water) Board
- In Patient services provided by public hospitals run by Municipality & the State Government
- Out Patient services provided by public hospitals run by the Municipality & the State Government
- Public bus transport services provided by the Delhi Transport Corporation
- School education provided by Municipality-run Primary Schools, State Government-run Primary Schools, and State Government-run Secondary Schools
- Services provided by Fair Price Shops and Kerosene Depots
- Services provided by the Motor Licensing Offices
- Services provided by the Sub Divisional Magistrate's Offices
- Services provided by the Sub Registrar's Offices

### **3.1 Organizational Anchor**

The Department of Administrative Reforms (DAR), Government of NCT Delhi was the anchor for this exercise. The organizational mandate of DAR (to act as a facilitator, in consultation with Government of India, Departments of Delhi Government, its Autonomous Bodies and Undertakings etc. to improve Government functioning through administrative reforms in the spheres of restructuring the Government, process improvement, organization & methods, grievance handling, modernization, citizens' charters, award scheme and best practices) gave a strong legitimacy to the exercise and also, brought in a clear ownership within the government. Also, the fact that the initiative came from the highest public office also made the heads of the utilities participate in the entire project run-up discussions (this, as discussed in a later section, had a major impact on the exercise).

### **3.2 Finding Institutional Champions**

Challenges in implementing the audit were manifold. For one, hitherto institutional experiences of PAC hinged around using the power of public feedback as a civil society-led accountability mechanism. This was the first time that the "instigator" happened to be from the other side (state)! Secondly, there was a huge political risk. To what extent will a technical exercise like this insulate itself from unexpected political undercurrents? Also, will the Chief Minister renegade on her promise to come clean with the findings publicly. An early strategy adopted was to create a common understanding among the utility managers on the intent of this "audit". It is interesting to note here that the Chief Minister was not too comfortable with the phrase "Citizen Report Card" and instead, suggested the term "Social Audit"; the reasoning was that Report Cards conveyed a notion of evaluation and assessment from outside, while Social Audit would reflect a more transparent and open initiative by the state. However, during the initial interactions with the utility managers, it was clear that a majority of them was not comfortable with the term "audit". Repeated presentations had to be made to assuage all misplaced concerns on this; ironically, it was the illustration from the Bangalore Report Card that convinced many utility managers of the neutrality and diagnostic power of this approach.

### **3.3 The Big Headlines from the People's Audit:**

A major finding of the audit was that government has extended access to most services, but has not been able to fully deliver on the quality and reliability of services. A disconcerting pointer from this study was the wide variations across geographical locations in Delhi on different aspects of service delivery. This means that in addition to service quality issues, equity in service delivery is also a matter of major concern. Spatial variability was observed to be high for most pro-poor services like provision of water to poor localities through water tankers; food and civil supplies and land registration. User feedback on interfaces with agencies also pointed to the limitations of reforms that aim to tackle front end changes. While increasing adaptations of technology in operations have clearly streamlined processes, the continuing existence of middlemen and weak monitoring of actual delivery show that more systemic changes are needed to make service delivery more transparent, reliable and responsive to people. Though Citizen Charters have been created for most services, knowledge about the same is quite limited. However, on the positive side wherever users were aware of Citizen Charters, they recognized their value and found the content useful. The Social Audit also highlighted the fact that there were very few instances of effective grievance redress whenever users complained about a problem. Also, the study underscored the fact that very few users who faced a problem actually lodged formal complaints, perhaps indicating low faith in formal grievance redress mechanisms.

### **3.4 From Symptoms to Reforms: Institutional Responses to the Audit**

The preliminary findings from the study were presented to the Chief Minister, her senior officers and the utility managers on May 25, 2006. The findings were reviewed and discussed threadbare and the openness exhibited by the Chief Minister to acknowledge shortcomings was remarkable; interestingly, the Delhi Jal Board (Water utility) of which she is the Chairperson was the worst rated in terms of overall satisfaction. Whenever a utility manager came up with a positive secondary statistic (like the overall pass percentage for schools), she would immediately point to the overall messages indicated by the end-users and asked them to pay attention to that. Her message was very clear "I appreciate all the financial and physical data put out by all of you, but at the end of the day, as a political leader and as the Chief Executive of this government, my interest is on what people in the ground say about the services". It was quite clear that this informed public feedback gave her a new and powerful perspective to address issues of public service delivery that are far removed from the mumbo-jumbo of official statistics.

The draft findings were then circulated to each service/department head to review them thoroughly and pose any queries or clarifications. The final report was drafted end of August and on September 4, 2007, the Chief Minister released the findings to the public at a press conference. Acknowledging the findings as a clear indicator to the government to focus more on the pro-poor sectors, the Chief Minister also announced that a high-level committee will be set-up to address the concerns that have come out of this audit and also, to assist individual departments and utilities to draft actionable measures. Following this, the Chief Minister unexpectedly requested the departments to prepare focused reform measures to address some of the emergent concerns. To make this initiative more embedded within the government, a small task force was created under the leadership of a former Chief Secretary of the Delhi Government, who was a major champion of the social audit during the initial phase.

The Taskforce then designed a series of highly interactive and focused brainstorming sessions with a small team of staff from each department; it was made clear that the team should be representative and cut across different levels within the organization. These intra-department discussions created an unprecedented ambience of dialogue and consultations. The point to note here is that the entire reform ideas and initiatives came from within the departments and utilities. The huge reservoir of organizational knowledge and experience was creatively harnessed to bring in a collective effort to examine the informed public voice that was articulated through the social audit and use the pointers emerging from that to carry out internal diagnosis and design effective response mechanisms.

## Lessons Learned

What accounts for this distinct turnaround in Bangalore's public services? What prompted a political leader to take an unprecedented political risk in inviting an independent civil organization to audit her government's performance? And what lessons can we learn from these enabling experiences? Needless to say, without deliberate interventions by the government and the service providers, no improvement would have taken place in the services. But the key question is what made them act? A whole set of complex factors seem to have been at work. An attempt is made here to identify some critical "demand" and "supply" side factors:

- a. **Power of Empirical Data:** There is, undoubtedly a clear advantage in "counting" the facts and experiences. To a large extent, institutional apathy can be traced to a lack of informed demand from citizens. Civic engagement, quite often tends to be anecdotal and emotive and in the process narrow down to confrontation and contestation. When accountability tools like citizen report cards, community score cards and social audits raise the level of discourses from the anecdotal to the factual, there is less defensiveness from public officials in receiving the findings. This is in contrast to many previous civil society initiatives which failed to create an effective engagement as the issues remained mostly in the anecdotal domain. As one official remarked quite poignantly: "This clearly separates the *"noise"* from the *"voice"*! The credibility, objectivity and neutrality of the tool certainly help in opening door and windows for a more effective engagement between the citizen and the state.
- b. **Context Setting & Consensus Creation:** Capturing and articulating citizens' voices without adequately preparing the response side will at best result only in some quick-fixes. It is critical that the process be inclusive, transparent and participatory in nature. There is usually a lot of negativity, scepticism and apprehension on the intent and focus of the CRCs; the phrase "report card" itself carries with it a tone of criticism and evaluation. However, innovative engagements like the "open houses" in Bangalore (wherein a series of structured interfaces between agencies and citizens were facilitated by PAC) or the initial roundtables held in Delhi with the utility managers and agency heads helped in creating a balanced view of the tool and its implications. These initial set of activities created a win-win ambience right at the beginning of the intervention itself.
- c. **Public Opinion as a trigger for institutional responses:** As evidenced from the Bangalore and Delhi examples, public officials played a key role in using the symptoms

arising from the citizen feedback as diagnostic pointers to design appropriate institutional responses<sup>10</sup>. Usually, consultants and external resource persons act as the facilitators/designers of internal reforms – though, technically they often bring in cutting-edge practices and ideas, very seldom do these find ownership within the department. However, here the series of diagnostic exercises and brainstorming sessions created a sense of internal ownership and commitment to change. The scientific nature of the information collected, the transparency in reviewing the findings prior to the public release and the fact that the findings reflected the good and the bad combined to provide a highly enabling momentum within the departments to identify areas and processes for reforms. The very fact that in Delhi, all intra-department reform strategies incorporated themes/ideas on empowering citizens is a testimony to the acceptance of the demand-side actors within the traditional institutional mindsets of the bureaucracy.

- d. **Demand Pressure through Civil Society Groups:** The report cards helped stimulate complementary public advocacy work, with the two factors together having a cumulative impact on the government and citizens of Bangalore. This advocacy, spearheaded by PAC, was carried out through a network of civic groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the city. The network included two types of organizations. Neighbourhood groups called residents' associations focus on one part of the city but have a direct interest in the performance of all the service providers. Citywide NGOs focus on specific civic or service-related issues. Both kinds of organizations participated in public meetings and seminars where report cards or other civic issues were discussed. These meetings engaged the service providers in active public dialogues, in contrast to the closed personal meetings with officials that previously were customary in all agencies. Some service providers, such as the electricity board, the water and sanitation board, and even the police, subsequently organized their own forums, inviting civil society groups for dialogue. As a result, interactions between organized civic groups and the service providers grew significantly. In addition to such meetings, several NGOs have made distinctive contributions by carrying out citywide campaigns on specific issues. These campaigns, in most cases assisted by partnership with PAC, have served to strengthen the city's "social capital." One NGO undertook advocacy work linked to property tax reform. Another examined the municipal budget and engaged the city corporation in a debate on service efficiency and public expenditure. A third worked on the improvement of solid waste management. These diverse interventions all signalled to the service providers that their activities were being watched and assessed in a systematic fashion. In different ways, all these civil society groups were demanding better services and accountability from the government and its agencies. In a recent move, PAC along with four other NGOs formed a city-wide "Coalition Against Corruption" in Bangalore; the Coalition also operates an anti-corruption hotline to register and pursue complaints on corruption-related issues in seven public utilities.
- e. **Reinforcement of Pressure by the Media:** The print media in Bangalore played an unusual role by adding their weight to the pressure for better services. In 1994 the newspapers did little more than publicise the negative findings of the report card or other similar critical assessments. Investigative reports on civic issues were few and far

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<sup>10</sup> Ravindra, A, 2004 'An Assessment of the Impact of Bangalore Citizen Report Cards on the Performance of Public Agencies, ECD Working Paper Series, No. 12, The World Bank, Washington

between. Subsequently, however, the newspapers began to take a much more proactive role. After deciding to devote more space to public service problems and related civic issues, several newspapers sought PAC's advice and technical support for special features. One newspaper began a series of reports on the different wards of the city, highlighting their problems and focusing on their elected council members. This was followed by another innovative campaign that newspapers seldom undertake, through which they organized interactive meetings in different parts of the city for citizens to voice specific problems to senior officials from selected city agencies. A large number of public officials were thus exposed to the issues of the localities and stimulated to respond with answers. FM radio channels also provide opportunities for city residents to call in and raise questions on key issues. This public process clearly put increased pressure on the agencies to be more transparent and accountable and to deliver on their promises.