

## INDIA

### REPORT CARDS ON URBAN SERVICES IN BANGALORE

*A 'report card' on urban public services is an innovative monitoring and evaluation device, which can systematically gather feedback from users on the performance of a city's service providers. This experiment as the first of its kind undertaken in India, demonstrates how citizens can demand greater accountability and improved performance from public institutions through the formation of information sharing and learning mechanisms and networks.*

The popular perception in India sees public services, which operate as highly inefficient bureaucratic monopolies, as unresponsive to consumer demands. The lack of accountability of service providers coupled with the lack of organised collective action by citizens had perpetuated and deteriorated condition in many cities. This was the case in Bangalore until 1993.

Initially started as an informal experiment, a small advisory group of concerned citizens headed by Dr. Samuel Paul, enlisted the support of a market research agency, Gallup MBA India Pvt. Ltd. to conduct a survey of citizens' satisfaction with the provision of the city's services (eg water, electricity, sanitation, healthcare, municipal services, etc). The findings and feedback from the sample surveys were gathered and collated to produce a report card that gave performance ratings on the major public agencies.

A report card proved to be an effective device to elicit response and provoke positive action from agencies. Based on a non-subjective database of quantitative facts rather than anecdotal evidence, the credibility of a report card cannot be easily dismissed. The underlying aim of the report card was to critically scrutinise the delivery of services from the viewpoint of end users (the citizens) by addressing four key questions:

- How satisfactory are the public services that matter most to the citizens?
- What specific aspects and features of their functioning are satisfactory or unsatisfactory?
- What are the direct and indirect costs of these services to their users?

- Can the information generated through the survey be used to rate the performance of service providers?

Two separate surveys for general households (the middle-class) and slum dwellers (low-income households) were conducted and interagency comparisons were drawn, but both studies clearly confirmed the high degree of public dissatisfaction with the city's services. The satisfaction ratings of service providers across the board were as low as 1% but not much higher than 25%.

The results also highlighted a number of critical qualitative issues, which revealed endemic corruption in the system and that the cost of public services in India are in fact, not as cost effective as they would seem. Although official fees and user charges may be low, there are a number of 'hidden' costs that users incur in order to compensate for the unreliability and inadequacy of these services. The survey revealed that up to a third of the very poor of the city; have to pay a bribe, often a major proportion of their scarce resources in order to get a service or to solve a service related problem. Moreover, the results showed that a majority of the users (54%) are willing to officially pay more for the services guaranteed to be of a reliable quality rather than to pay under the table when quality cannot be assured. An informal 'bribery' system of user pays principle clearly did not automatically guarantee quality of service. This is reflected for example in the statistical correlation that the worst rated agency, the Bangalore Development Authority which received a mere 1% customer satisfaction rating also scored the highest rating for corruption.

Given the reputation of being complacent bureaucracies, many agencies were slow to respond. Of the eight agencies assessed in the survey, four remained indifferent although the four other agencies that did respond dealt with services that mattered most to the people. Moreover, the public agencies that did respond positively utilised the report card as an aid to improve services rather than interpret it as an organisational threat. Not surprisingly for example, the worst rated agency, the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA), was one of the first to respond and to undertake reform.

Policy, procedures and staff training programmes were reviewed and streamlined to some extent in order to improve the quality of service delivery. The

BDA co-operated with Bangalore Municipal Corporation in a joint forum of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and public agencies to promote information sharing and dissemination as well as experiment with new approaches to solving problems of public concern. Other agencies have subsequently formalised periodic dialogues or grievance redressal procedures with users to improve service delivery.

The report card not only became a useful self-monitoring diagnostic tool for agencies but also proved flexible to adaptation and transferability to other situations in India as well as to other areas internationally (eg the Philippines, the Ukraine, Washington D.C.). Report Cards on services in other major Indian cities (eg Chennai, Pune, Ahmedabad, Calcutta and Mumbai) have been subsequently commissioned and the model scheme has fostered new collaborations, networks and partnerships with NGOs and local CBOs that are interested in taking follow-up action.

Report cards have also been devised on specific service sectors (eg hospitals, public transport) as well as for other circumstances (eg for ensuring the accountability of electoral candidates). All in all, since the first experiment in Bangalore, report cards have been widely applied in different cities, across various sectors and for various purposes.

Whilst the Bangalore experiment exemplifies a highly successful case that can be replicated, one needs to bear in mind certain challenges when applying the model to different contexts. Report cards tend to focus on the quality of services provided, rather than on the issue of access to services in the first place. The scope of inquiry in surveys may need to be broadened to address the question of access, which is a particularly pressing problem in rural as well as urban and peri-urban contexts.

Channels of open information dissemination and public dialogue are critical to the effectiveness of Report Card monitoring as a model to ensure public accountability. However, in less democratic political contexts where freedom of the press is restricted or civic activism is inhibited, it may be more difficult to conduct accurate surveys or open public debate.

Monitoring and evaluation exercises need to be continued over periods of time in order to be of use in sustaining positive outcomes. Report cards cannot be useful in the long run without subsequent action. What was particularly successful in this case was the sustainability of a one-off experiment as a replicable model. Information was carried through to implementation and research was linked to action. Moreover, the informal venture has been continued through subsequent institutionalisation into a non-government organisation with funding support from the National Foundation for India and the Ford Foundation.

Named as the Public Affairs Centre (PAC), this non-profit watchdog agency has been set up to continue with research, consultancy as well as advocacy work, with the overall objective to improve the quality of governance in India.



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