



INDIA:

CITIZEN REPORT CARDS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC SERVICE PERFORMANCE

In a Nutshell

Citizens grading government agencies for performance and publishing the results in the mass media: this is the essence of the report card methodology initiated by the Public Affairs Centre in Bangalore. The centre conducts client satisfaction surveys among lower income groups, assessing their approval of public service providers such as electricity and water supply departments. The findings are publicly shared as report cards, setting new standards of public accountability. A credible methodology of surveying, tabulation and quantitative analysis underpins the approach, and the report card experience has now been replicated worldwide.

The Story

In 1993, under the banner of the Public Affairs Centre, a small group of people in Bangalore who were concerned about the city's standards of public services initiated an exercise to collect feedback from users. Perceptions on quality, efficiency and adequacy were aggregated to create a report card that rated the performance of the city's major providers of telephone connections, water and electricity. The findings presented a quantitative measure of satisfaction and perceived levels of corruption, which, following coverage in the media, not only mobilized citizen and government support for reform, but also prompted the agencies themselves to respond positively to calls for improvement.

The exercise was repeated in 1999, and has been replicated in at least five other Indian cities, as well as in the state of Karnataka, where Bangalore is the capital. Subsequent rounds have taken a partnership approach, where findings are first shared with the agency in question and possible solutions explored before media campaigns begin. By systematically gathering and disseminating public feedback, the report cards have served as a surrogate for competition among monopolies – usually government owned – that previously lacked the incentive to respond to client needs. They have been a useful medium through which citizens can credibly and collectively inform agencies about their performance, and bring pressure for change.

Between 1994 and 1999, four of the eight agencies covered in the 1993 report card in Bangalore made attempts to respond to public dissatisfaction. The worst-rated agency – the Bangalore Development Authority – reviewed its internal systems for service delivery, introduced training for junior staff, and, along with the Bangalore

Municipal Corporation, began to host a joint forum of NGOs and public agencies to consult on solving high-priority problems such as waste management.

The Karnataka Electricity Board formalized periodic dialogues with resident associations to garner feedback. Two other agencies tried to strengthen their grievance redressal systems.

There have been lessons learned from the application of the report cards, and the Public Affairs Centre is engaged in refining the methodology to take these on board. One issue that came up was that the questions asked did not allow for flexible responses, especially when used in urban, low-income settlements. The focus on quantitative data did not permit qualitative responses, and queries tended to refer to men as the primary respondents. In lower income settlements, quite a few households are headed by women, who are generally available to answer questions. The centre is also working to eliminate subjectivity in ranking, especially between client groups of differing socioeconomic profiles.

Results and Critical Factors

- The report card approach is now used widely in the Bangalore public service sector. The initiative has led to the establishment of a *swabhi-mana*, or forum for citizen's voices, which civic bodies treat as a nonpartisan representative of citizens' groups and NGOs.
- Report cards have also been adapted for use by different agencies across the world, including the World Bank, UNDP and Transparency International. Report cards in Washington, D.C. and in major cities in the Philippines and Ukraine reflect the growing application of this approach in varied settings.
- The report cards have forced hitherto apathetic public agencies to listen and react to citizen concerns. While anecdotal evidence on the incompetence of public agencies has always existed, quantification of perceptions has brought with it a credible indicator that lays down the extent of (dis)satisfaction and allows interagency comparison, triggering internal reforms.
- In India, public awareness of the issues of quality service delivery and corruption has grown substantially, following heavy coverage of report findings in the mainstream media. In 1994, the country's premier daily, *The Times of India*, ran a weekly feature for two months focusing on one interesting finding at a time.
- Although report cards are a seemingly uncomplicated method of surveying citizen feedback, they require a competent intermediary that is technically versed in piloting and administering a poll.
- The process requires adequate financing, time and interest on the part of local residents, in addition to a conducive socio-political climate. These are all demanding requirements, and innovative ways will have to be sought if the exercise in developing countries is to be cost-effective and easily manageable.

Further information

N. Banerjee. 2002. "Public Expenditure Review: Citizens' Report Cards in India." In *capacity.org*, 15. ECDPM (www.capacity.org).

National Foundation for India (www.nfi.org.in).

Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore (www.pacindia.org).

World Bank's participation site (www.worldbank.org/participation/accountpoor.html).