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Empowering Citizens' Participation and Voice

This field note explores the dynamics of voice mechanisms that enable citizenry to engage with the service provider, especially on grievance redressal.

Executive Summary

A citizen's ability to decide what and how much is required for basic survival is a precursor to practicing citizen power. Citizens have the right to demand quality services and hold service providers accountable for any lack. The World Bank's World Development Report 2004 points out that successful services require relationships in which clients can monitor and discipline providers (client power) and citizens can have a strong voice in policymaking (voice). However, in many developing countries, the inability to provide services, let alone quality services, has left a major gap in both service delivery and citizen participation. Developing countries have often been criticized for poorly planned civic infrastructure and apathetic response rates towards their citizens. Their track record is often marred with a failure to deliver on counts of basic amenities such as water, sanitation, electricity, and roads. This strongly impacts citizen-client relationships. In the absence of competition or alternate service providers, such relationships are weakened. The lack of information and access to knowledge leaves users at a disadvantage, as they are unable to articulate their demands for better services. In such cases, there are no opportunities for citizens to voice their concerns, let alone monitor and influence service providers. Therefore, ensuring effective channels for voicing grievances and citizen participation are key to downward accountability.

Promulgated in 2001, the Local Government Ordinance (LGO) presented a new model of local government in Pakistan. It brought about major structural changes in service delivery including municipal services—water and sanitation services devolved to Tehsil Municipal Administrations (TMAs) that have fiscal authority, administrative control, and political supervision. A number of structures and system relationships were enabled, relating to structures for participation, decentralizing certain functions to the tehsil level, planning, budgeting and financial flows, institutional options for service delivery, oversight and monitoring, and inspection and intervention. As it stands, the TMA itself holds great power and potential in providing a platform to citizens and for activating client voice and power. Since knowledge imparts transparency leading to social accountability, this system can create a much-needed environment through which citizens are able to access and probably exercise their influence on the government.

This field note explores the dynamics of making available mechanisms that allow voicing of grievances and exercising client power for redress through a case study from an urban municipality in Pakistan—the Tehsil Municipal Administration (TMA) of Gulshan-e-Iqbal in Karachi. The TMA established a computerized customer complaints center for addressing consumer grievances. This initiative proved to be not just a technological advancement for the citizens of the area, but also a sorely needed confidence-building measure. Now residents had the option to personally approach their union council Nazim (or Mayor) and town officers with their problems, thus bypassing an entire level of bureaucracy that had not been able to deliver in the past.

Background

In Pakistan, the Local Government Ordinance (LGO) of 2001 initiated a process of devolution of power that created many opportunities for effective and responsive service delivery. The new system of government comprises three tiers beginning with the district and ending with the constituents. The system has presented the opportunity of working directly with the people, as districts are now devolved to the lowest possible unit of the union council made up of, quite literally, households and neighborhoods. Within this structure, the potential for citizen participation is immense. Accessing the citizens' voice and utilizing their participation could be the opportunity embedded through LGO that offers the potential solution to many blockages created by the new system.

The central point of the three-tiered local government structure is the tehsil, or town, municipal administration. The TMA is, quite literally, the 'thoroughfare' between the district government, which is the overall decisionmaker and financier of the local government system, and the union council, which is the citizen's representative at the

Box 1: Citizen Participation Oversight Bodies—Provisions and Opportunities

Though provision for direct election of union councilors provides the most potent form of citizen participation in local government, the Police Order and the Local Government Ordinance (LGO) also provide numerous new bodies through which citizens are able to access and potentially exercise their influence on the government. These mechanisms can be classified into three broad categories:

- External oversight bodies provide some external check on performance and probity. These include monitoring committees at the district, tehsil municipal administration and union level, District Public Safety Commission, accounts committees, and village and neighborhood councils.

- Citizen Dispute Resolution mechanisms establish direct accountability relationships between citizens and service providers. The *zila mohtasib*, or district ombudsman, is meant to provide a formal avenue for redress for citizens. Similarly, the LGO provides for the *Musalihat Anjuman*, which functions as committees to promote amicable settlement of disputes.

- The Citizen Community Boards (CCBs) are formally registered and have a legal claim on the local government planning and budgeting process. At least 25 percent of the total development budget of each tier of local government must be earmarked for projects identified by CCBs. Each CCB has to make a cash contribution of 20 percent in order to tap into these funds.
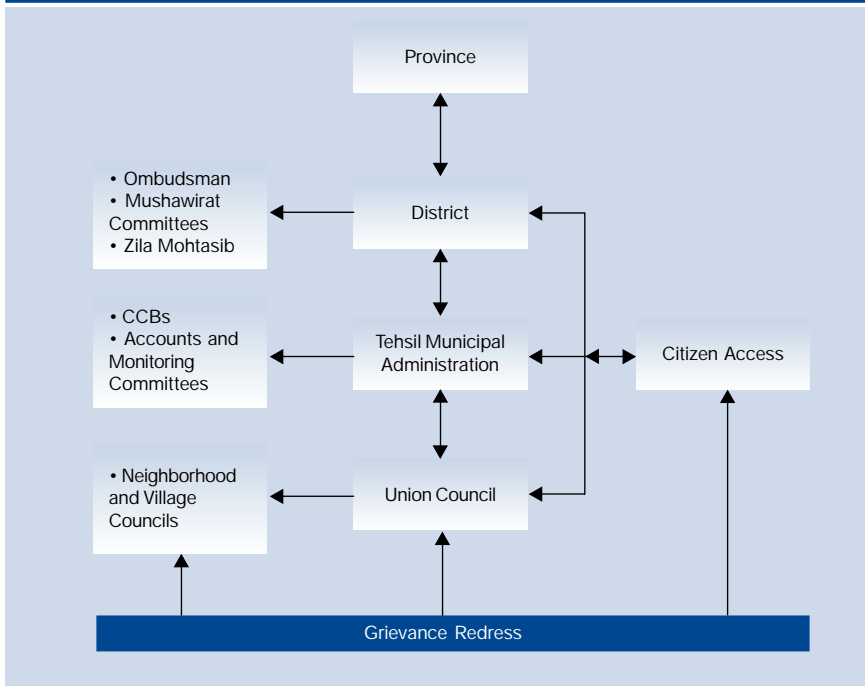
Source: Devolution in Pakistan. 2004. Annex 1: Recent History. ADB/DflD/World Bank.

One of the key limitations to exercising citizen voice in Karachi was that consumers were unaware of where to go and whom to approach with their problems.

Figure 1: The Local Government Ordinance: Citizens' Viewpoint

neighborhood level. As such, the TMA itself holds great power and potential in providing a platform to citizens and for activating client voice and power. The TMA is also directly responsible for service delivery on many counts, including sanitation, which has been devolved from an earlier centralized system.

Gulshan-e-Iqbal TMA: An Introduction

Home to over 15 million people, the bustling metropolis of Karachi was divided into 18 separate towns after devolution in 2001. Gulshan-e-Iqbal Town is one of the larger of these, covering an approximate area of 100 square kilometers, and with a population of almost 1 million. The area is further sub-divided into 13 union councils. The town has some of the most high-end residential areas in the city, as well as a high density of shantytowns and low-income settlements, the latter of which make up at least 60 percent of the total population. This dichotomy of rich versus poor converges when it comes to the provision of basic urban services, most notably water supply and sanitation. The situation has been bleak at both ends—choked sewage lines, a severe lack of running water resulting in a hyperactive water tanker mafia, and a centralized system of service delivery that has not been able to keep up with the burgeoning demands of a mega-city. The local government system faced the mammoth task of not just gaining the confidence of a disillusioned citizenry, but also of accepting responsibility for a decentralized system of service delivery that had not earlier been tested.

Figure 2: The Gulshan-e-Iqbal Tehsil Municipal Administration Model
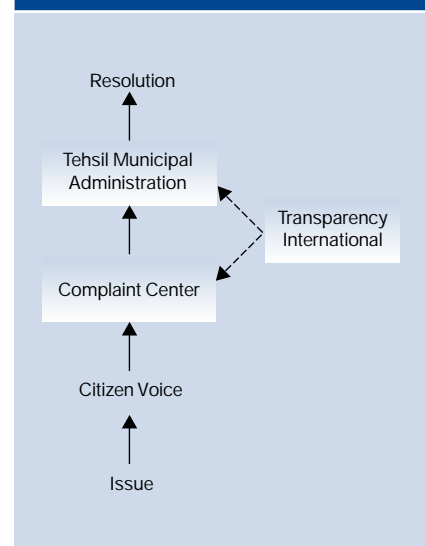
Customer Complaint Center: A Changed View

In late 2001, only months after the newly elected local governments took office, the City District Nazim (or Mayor) of Karachi attended a presentation made by a global non-profit organization, Transparency International (TI). The Karachi City Nazim, as well as the Nazims of all the 18 towns, were briefed on a TI project initiative to develop an online system of complaints designed to improve service delivery. The presentation outlined the possibility of establishing a series of computerized public complaint centers for the city at the town level.

One of the key limitations to exercising citizen voice in Karachi was that consumers were unaware of where to go and whom to approach with their problems. The pre-devolution conventional mode of complaints was primarily calling a central authority via the telephone, which did not often result in the desired outcome. The proposed centers were therefore envisaged as an effective interface, between the town's residents, their locally elected representatives, and service providers for the submission and redress of grievances regarding various civic needs and facilities. The TMA Nazim showed a keen interest in setting up such a complaint center on a trial basis. Gulshan Town has one of the highest rates of computer literacy in the city and the new Nazim had been eager to modernize the as yet untested local government system. This was the perfect opportunity. Transparency International offered technical assistance to support the design and installation as well as technical support for the complaint center. The TMA, on the other hand, provided the space, the human resources and, most importantly, the financing for the initiative—nearly Rs. 1 million (US$16,476).[1] This latter point is an important one to highlight, since one of the major obstacles facing the new local governments was an inadequacy of funds from the provincial centers. The Gulshan TMA, however, set a benchmark in terms of financial allocations by setting its first budget at Rs. 32 million (US$527,234), a significant amount for a TMA that inherited a budget of only Rs. 600,000 (US$9,886) and a liability of almost Rs. 2 million (US$32,952) from the previous government.

Formally inaugurated in January 2005 after almost two years of planning, software design, and construction, the complaint center was the first of its kind in Pakistan. The project was preceded

[1] US$1 = PKR 60.6941 (as of March 28, 2007). Conversion rates are from www.xe.com; all conversions in the text are approximations.

by a survey of infrastructure facilities available in the town, and was hosted on a website developed for the TMA. The software was specifically designed to enable an interactive interface between the citizens and the TMA. Each complainant could either call into the center or register his complaint via the TMA website. A tracking number would be assigned to the complainant through which progress could be traced either through the website or by telephone. Once registered, the complaint would automatically be forwarded via the system to the responsible Deputy Town Officer (DTO). If the complaint was not attended to within three days, the system would automatically escalate it to the relevant Town Officer, then to the Town Municipal Officer and finally, if completely unanswered, directly to the Town Nazim.

The system was also programmed to generate summarized weekly and monthly reports for both the Nazim and the Town Municipal Officer, so as to monitor progress in each area of complaint. This chain of command put

into motion an inbuilt accountability mechanism not only for the public, who had the power to now trace their complaints, but also within the local government system. Such accountability was unique in the respect that it was completely governed by an automated system as opposed to a paper trail.

For residents of Gulshan Town, who were unused to having direct access to their elected representatives, the system itself was a new discovery. The Complaints Center was not just a technological advancement for them, but also a confidence-building measure that was sorely needed. Now residents had the option to personally approach their union council Nazim and town

officers with their problems, thus bypassing an entire level of bureaucracy that had not been able to deliver in the past. Moreover, the relevance of the project was underlined by the fact that despite the vast geographical spread of the town, the system could be accessed by anyone with a computer.

Citizens could submit complaints in seven major areas—land encroachment, water, sewage, sanitation, mechanical or electrical, buildings or roads, and parks. The most common complaint was related to water supply and sanitation. This is not surprising in a city the size of Karachi, whose growth has far outstripped an overburdened public service system. Earlier, due to the lack of a problem identification mechanism

and the sheer size of the city, the city's government found it next to impossible to deal with situations that varied from a burst water main to overflowing sewers. Now, however, the area was both geographically and topically divided based on the nature of the complaints received. Armed with the exact location and nature of a single complaint, the TMA staff was able to pinpoint both the problem and the solution.

With the political backing of the town Nazim, plans were also initiated to create an electronic network among all the 13 union councils so that complaints could be decentralized. The closer they were to the neighborhoods and the trouble spots, the more efficiently the problem could be redressed. Also in the

pipeline were plans to enable the public to register their complaints at the nearest petrol pump if access to a computer or telephone were unavailable, as was the plan to equip all Duty Town Officers with pagers so that the response rate to actual problems onsite is quicker. With the implementation of such a system, the possibility for revenue generation also rose. In Karachi city's Gulshan and Lyari TMAs, for example, out of a registered 1.3 million water users, only 0.25 percent were paying water bills. With the ability to register online and calculate user charges, this system could now track the requisite dues of town residents and bind them to making payments. In essence, these plans were paving the way for Gulshan Town becoming the first e-government in the country. However, before these plans were put to action, the local government changed after elections in August 2005.

Despite this change in the local government, the Complaint Center continued its outreach and functions. At the time of writing of this note (November 2006), the new government also seems keen to carry on the innovations set in place by its predecessor. Some positive changes have also been added and the Center is now being made operational on a 24-hour basis. There are now some concerns, however, that the political will originally associated with the launching of the Complaint Center may not continue in the face of differing priorities of the new administration. The important requirement now is to analyze how to ensure sufficient demand from citizens to sustain the Center and to also enlarge its operations into linking with citizen-led monitoring of grievance redress.

Prerequisites to Effective Citizen Participation: The Gulshan-e-Iqbal Experience

While knowledge provides transparency leading to social accountability, the fact remains that a large part of the responsibility for providing services still rests with the state. A community can, using its own resources, lay sanitation pipes in the neighborhood lanes. If the main trunk sewer is inoperable, however, then how far can citizens themselves go in addressing the issue on a self-help basis? In the same way, residents can communally dispose of their garbage at selected disposal points but if the state is unable to transport the garbage to the landfill site, then how far should people themselves go to fulfill that responsibility? Service delivery therefore, remains a question of state efficiency.

The Gulshan-e-Iqbal TMA case also highlights essential factors that contribute to effective service delivery or a visible improvement in services as a direct result of citizens exercising their voice.

Public Sector Capacity to Response

Public grievance redress can only be successful if those grievances are efficiently addressed by the service provider—in this case, the government. Despite its interest and resources, the Gulshan TMA lacked adequate human resource capacity to pro-actively resolve issues such as faulty sewage lines or insufficient water supply. When complaints started pouring in through the Complaint Center, the response rate of the TMA remained slow and many complaints could not be addressed. Unused to such a systematic collection of complaints and already overburdened due to insufficient staff capacity, the DTOs and TMOs found it difficult to resolve issues within the stipulated three-day period.

Informed Civil Society

While registering complaints ensures citizen participation and is a significant way to influence effective service delivery, it essentially only provides citizens with the opportunity to react to services. For this type of mechanism to work, an effective communication campaign must also exist. Similarly, for a participatory process to be successful, an active and demanding civil society is also required, and this is not always the case. The original design of the Complaint Center project included the use of electronic media to advertise the system and explain its modalities. This, however, never really materialized. At the most, the TMA was only able to advertise the website through local newspapers, which was not sufficient to retain public interest. As a result, a fewer number of people were actually able to utilize the service. When the TMA was actively advertising the Center almost 200 complaints would come in daily, but as time passed, this number reduced to about 30 or 40. The poor response rate led to residents eventually not using the system, as opposed to a drop due to successful redress of complaints.

A robust communication campaign and energetic civil society groups are needed to add value to citizen participation—otherwise citizens only have the opportunity to react to services, not to demand the change they want.

Responsive Management Structures

Mechanisms for collecting customer complaints only work if conditions exist on both sides of the equation—on one side, a customer base that will demand change and improvement and, on the other, a management structure that will respond effectively to these incentives. When either side of the equation is not sufficiently developed then the objectives may not be met.

Addressing Systemic Causes

Customer complaint mechanisms tend to focus on the individual's relationship with the service provider instead of the aggregate body of citizens. This makes such interventions

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a micro-exercise rather than an effort aimed at addressing the underlying causes embedded in the entire system. In fact, many of the factors leading to poor services are often systemic in nature and not readily visible by the end-users who are reacting to service provision for their respective neighborhoods.

Recognizing Strategic Priorities

As underlying causes are often part of a larger, systematic breakdown, strategic choices need to be made to focus on the underlying causes. And these choices mean that certain issues will have to take priority over others, especially in an environment of limited resources, and that some customers may be more satisfied than others with this decision. The trick is how to share these strategic choices between service providers and customers; if everyone is part of a strategic choice or priority setting, there is less risk during implementation that resources will be diverted to attend to other needs.

Downward Accountability

Creating mechanisms requiring local governments to engage their citizens in prioritization for service delivery and oversight to the implementation require a systemic approach to exercising downward accountability. The ultimate aim, however, is that citizen participation and voice is effectively linked to the budget-making and budget-implementation process through social auditing as this is where the real priorities will be decided. Citizens need to take an active part in setting priorities—only then can they ensure that their own priorities are effectively addressed.

Box 2: Downward Accountability: Possible Interventions for Clients

- Strengthening political voice through which citizens and civil society can sharpen political accountability through better monitoring of elected representatives.

- Activating client power through which direct provider-client interface can be strengthened to enable users to directly engage with and hold suppliers responsible for service performance.

- Exploring intermediate routes whereby new options such as decentralization of service delivery functions to local elected governments or independent regulatory agencies can be introduced.

Source: Badal Malick. 'Citizen Voice and Client Power: How to Build Effective and Sustainable Public Accountability in Urban Services.' Water and Sanitation Program-South Asia.

ABOUT THE SERIES

WSP Field Notes describe and analyze projects and activities in water and sanitation that provide lessons for sector leaders, administrators, and individuals tackling the water and sanitation challenges in urban and rural areas. The criteria for selection of stories included in this series are large-scale impact, demonstrable sustainability, good cost recovery, replicable conditions, and leadership.

Sustainability

A complaints redress system has to work both ways for it to be truly replicable and successful.

The TMA has to gain the credibility of the people by responding to their needs, while the citizens themselves should constantly monitor, and follow up on, all the processes by asking

questions and raising issues. In essence, then, this association needs to form a partnership of sorts where both the TMA and the people have to work together to make innovations a success. This is where civil society and nongovernmental organizations' networks can play a very important role by acting as representatives for citizens and providing them with an alternate platform for making their voice heard and grievances redressed.

Groups such as Neighborhood Committees and Citizen Community Boards (CCBs) can act both as catalysts and representatives of citizen power in bringing the citizens' voice to the state by providing monitoring feedback to local governments for improving service delivery. CCBs, in particular, are sanctioned by the LGO to provide alternate mechanisms of service delivery. They, therefore, play an important role in bringing the LGO to fruition and also providing credibility to local government systems.

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