Public Affairs Centre Develops Citizen Report Cards in India

Organizational Profile
The Public Affairs Centre (PAC), a non-profit organization formed in India in 1996, is dedicated to improving the quality of governance in the country. Beginning as a small citizens' initiative to help citizens make informed choices during the Bangalore municipal elections, PAC has since striven to enhance transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in electoral and governance processes. PAC undertakes and supports research on public policy and services, disseminates research findings, facilitates collective action, and provides advisory services to state and non-state agencies.

a. Introduction

Bangalore is one of India's largest cities and a major software and industrial center.[13] However, the city suffers from poor public services. Agencies in charge of municipal services (water, garbage collection, road and park maintenance, etc.) are unreliable, and corruption is rampant among all service providers. Inspired by the private sector practice in India of conducting client satisfaction surveys, a group of residents undertook a citizen report card exercise in 1993 to measure citizen satisfaction with public service providers. Subsequently, the group formed PAC to undertake additional surveys. The report card exercise raises awareness of service providers' poor performance and compels them to take corrective action.

The initiative asks users: How satisfactory are the public services you receive? Which aspects of the services are satisfactory and which are not? What are the direct and indirect costs (including bribes) of acquiring these services?

The first report card exercise, in 1993, surveyed 480 middle-income and 330 low-income households that had interacted with one of eight selected public service providers in the preceding six months. Subsequent surveys in 1999 and 2003 focused on seven of these agencies, which were chosen because they served the largest number of people. Agencies assessed in all three report card exercises to date include the water and sewer board, electricity board, public hospitals, development authority, and regional transport office. The questionnaire used for the survey measured user satisfaction in such areas as staff behavior, the number of visits required to complete a task, the ease with which problems were resolved, and the quality of information provided.

The 1993 exercise revealed low levels of public satisfaction with all service providers. Just one percent of the people surveyed expressed satisfaction with the Bangalore Development Authority, for example. Corruption was widespread in almost all agencies; one-third of the poor households surveyed had paid a bribe to public officials in the previous six months. Middle-income customers generally gave low marks in regard to staff behavior, problem resolution, and the number of visits required. The situation was even worse for the poor, many of whom reported ill-treatment by public officials.

These results were shared with senior agency officials and were widely publicized. Many newspapers and magazines highlighted the findings of corruption in public services. The findings were also disseminated through seminars and meetings across the city. A series of “open house” meetings brought together citizen groups that had not been involved in the survey.

The report card exercise was repeated in 1999 and 2003. The 1999 report card results showed a partial improvement for two agencies, but overall citizen satisfaction remained low and respondents seemed even less satisfied with staff in all of the agencies than in 1993. The 2003 report card, in contrast, revealed substantial improvement in almost all agencies; average user satisfaction increased by more than 40 percent between 1999 and 2003.

b. Methodology

The process of developing a citizen report card (CRC) can be divided into six phases, described below. (For more detail, see Wagle et al., “Citizen Report Card Surveys – A Note on the Concept and Methodology,” 2004.)

Phase One: Identification of Scope, Actors, and Purpose
First Step: Clarify Scope of CRC Evaluation

The first step is defining the scope of the survey to be conducted, namely, what type(s) of public services will be assessed and how the findings will be used. CRC surveys are often repeated on a single subject or in a single community; the first CRC is frequently used to identify poor service providers, while later CRCs are used to determine whether providers have improved in response to earlier survey findings.

Second Step: Coalition Building for Credibility

The credibility of survey findings depends to some degree on the initial legitimacy of the group conducting the survey. In some cases, the involvement of international organizations can heighten the survey’s credibility, but in other cases this type of external involvement may be ineffectual or even counterproductive. The World Bank, for instance, has technically proficient staff who can assist or fund an organization conducting a survey, but they are not always looked upon favorably.

Phase Two: Questionnaire Design
First Step: Arrange Focus Group Sessions With Service Providers and Service Users

Prior to soliciting views from service users, the group conducting the survey must decide which users will be surveyed – for example, those who have used the services within the past three months, six months, 18 months, or during any time period? Service providers can be asked for information on the services they provide and on needed improvements that have already been identified. The information gathered from these focus groups should inform the questionnaire content.

Second Step: Define the Structure and Size of the Questionnaire

As with any survey, time and quality constraints limit the number of questions that can be asked. One useful practice is to break the questionnaire into sections that different members of the household can answer. Another is to conduct “rotating interviews,” in which the first household is asked questions related to one set of public services, the next household is asked about a different set of services, and so on.

Guidelines for CRC Questions

Where standards for a particular public service exist, the questionnaire should check whether they are being met. For example, if the provider of drinking water has committed to provide water once a day, include a specific question to assess whether service is provided as promised:

Sample question: How often do you get drinking water?
1 – More than once a day 2 – Once a day 3 – Less than once a day

When standards do not exist (which is the case in many countries), another way must be found to evaluate the quality of service delivery. The following are examples of questions that can be asked to obtain feedback on the accessibility of health centers.

Option 1: How long does it take to travel to the health center that you most regularly visit? Followup question: And what is your mode of transportation?
Option 2: What is the distance from your house to the health center that you most regularly visit?

Both options provide useful information, so try to identify the type of feedback that would be most useful given the purpose of the CRC and the local setting.

To avoid collecting outdated information, include a time frame when necessary. For example, one might want feedback only from households that have used a service in the past year.

Sample question: Have you or anyone in your household used public hospital services in the past year?

If you are asking a distance-related question or any other question for which the unit of information (distance in kilometers, time in minutes, etc.) affects the respondent's answer, make sure the unit is identified in the question. For open-ended questions, ask investigators to note the unit of measurement used in the answer, even when the unit is specified in the question. This provides a double-check and allows for conversions when a respondent's answer is given in a unit different from the one in the question.

Sample question: On average, how many minutes do you wait to see a member of the hospital staff?

Several types of answer scales are commonly used to collect feedback. The type of scale used affects the interpretation of the survey findings: extensive scales allow for more nuanced conclusions, while simple scales provide findings that are easy to convey.

Sample question: How do you rate the reliability of public transport service in your area/village? 1 – Good, 2 – Average, 3 – Poor, 4 – Not applicable

Finally, questions should be written as neutrally as possible. A question such as "What do you dislike the most about the services you receive?" presupposes that the user dislikes something about the services unless balanced by another question that asks: "What do you like the most about the services you receive?"

Third Step: Pre-Test the Questionnaire

Questionnaires should be tested on focus groups similar to those organized in the first step, and any necessary modifications made prior to the survey's launch. The persons who will conduct the survey should also test it before going into the field, and time should be allowed to modify questions or questioning methods based on their feedback. If a question confuses a significant number of people or requires a great deal of clarification, it should probably be changed.

If the survey has been translated into multiple languages, all surveys should be re-translated back into the primary language (by someone other than the original translator) before the survey is conducted, to ensure consistency across all instruments.

Phase 3: Sampling

First Step: Identify the Geographic Regions from Which Respondents Will Be Drawn

Prior to determining the survey sample size, attention should be paid to the geographic region(s) in which the survey will be launched. It may be useful to divide the regions into areas based on factors such as type of housing, age of locality, or median income. Within these divisions, select a number of localities from which households in different income brackets will be chosen once the survey sample size has been decided.

Second Step: Determine Survey Sample Size

Budget, time, and organizational capacity will limit the survey size; enumerators (the people who conduct the survey) must be paid and perhaps transported to the survey areas, leaflets must be printed, and so on. Keep in mind that the goal is to achieve good representation of different parts of the population rather than simply to generate a large number of completed questionnaires. Try to capture as many social strata as possible in the locality being surveyed. PAC has found that a sample size of 300-350 households is ideal for each public service that is the subject of a survey.

Third Step: Choose Sample Respondents

In a CRC survey, the most likely unit of analysis is the household. However, even within a household, sample respondents need to be selected. Typically, the head of the household will be chosen to respond, though if the survey is broken into different sets of questions, other household members may be approached for answers. Other members of the household may also be better informed about some questions than the head of the household; for example, someone who does not work outside the home may know more about daytime power outages than a household head who works outside the home.

Proper sampling is no easy task. One useful technique is random sampling, in which each household is assigned a number and then numbers are drawn at random; households with numbers corresponding to the drawn numbers are surveyed. Another useful technique is stratified random sampling, in which researchers establish categories such as men/women or slum/non-slum households and then choose random samples from within each category. Many other ways of sampling exist as well.

Phase 4: Execution of Survey

First Step: Select and Train a Team of Enumerators

Survey personnel should have a good understanding of the purpose of the project and how the survey contributes to this purpose. They should receive training before being sent to conduct the survey. In some cases, it may be useful to employ female interviewers to speak to female respondents and male interviewers to speak to male respondents.

Second Step: Perform Random Checks of Interviews

To ensure the survey's credibility is not compromised by inaccurate recording of household responses, it is useful to perform random spot monitoring of interviews. If survey questions are misinterpreted or some answers are found to be inconsistent, re-interviewing is required. Enumerators should ask the questions exactly as they are written. This prevents an interviewer's own biases from affecting the answers and ensures better comparability across survey responses.

After completing each interview, survey personnel should review the collected information and identify any inconsistencies. Only after the collected information has been deemed accurate and satisfactory should it be entered into data spreadsheets.

Phase 5: Analyze Data

Once all the data have been consolidated, analysis can begin. Respondents likely will have rated government services on a scale, for example, -5 to +5, or 1 to 7. One way to generate aggregate scores is to tally the responses for a common set of questions, calculate the average response, and then express this average as a percentage. For example, if the average user rating on a particular public agency's overall effectiveness was 3.7 on a scale of 1 to 7, the percentage would be 53 percent (3.7 divided by 7). This percentage can be read as the "grade" for the report card.

Statistical tests should be run on the data to determine whether the survey results can be applied to the greater population and whether differences between sub-groups are statistically significant. It is helpful – if not essential – to find a person or group (for example, a research center at a university, a graduate student, or an experienced survey company) with the statistical analysis skills to assist with this phase of the process, if these skills are not available internally.

Phase 6: Dissemination

First Step: Engage Officials

It may not be helpful to use report card results to publicly embarrass particular service providers. Instead, one can first share the preliminary findings with them so they can respond; any genuine explanations should then be noted in the final report and factored into the recommendations.

Second Step: Engage the Media

The findings from the report card initiative could be presented at a press conference or similar event. To increase coverage of the event, the group that conducted the survey can prepare press kits that include brief printable stories, media-friendly press releases, and translations of the report into local languages. The group should seek to attract multiple media formats – including print, television, radio, and new media such as websites, discussion boards, and blogs.

Third Step: Foster Communication between Service Providers and Users

Bringing together service providers and users after the report cards have been published gives both parties a chance to discuss their reactions. These discussions can put added pressure on service providers to improve their performance; at the very least, they allow users to voice their opinions. If possible, schedule an event like a public hearing during which the public can ask questions of service providers.

Fourth Step: Present Your Message

The final report should present the survey results, draw conclusions from them, and recommend steps to fix any problems the survey identified. It should include both the positive and the negative results, and apart from exceptional cases, it should be a catalyst for change rather than a condemnation of service providers.

For a more in-depth look at CRCs, consult *Improving Local Governance and Service Delivery: Citizen Report Card Learning Toolkit*, created by PAC, the Asian Development Bank, and the Asian Development Bank Institute, at http://www.citizenreportcard.com/index.html. The appendices of the PDF version include additional resources such as sample press releases, sample final reports, and budget checklists.

c. Results Achieved

Successes

Public satisfaction with service delivery fluctuated among the three surveys conducted over the ten-year period in Bangalore – though the 2003 results showed remarkable improvements in public satisfaction over the 1993 results. Even though the 1999 survey did not compare very favorably to the 1993 survey, its findings showed that some agencies had attempted to respond to the public dissatisfaction revealed in the first report card.

Three agencies – Bangalore Telecom, the Electricity Board, and the Water and Sewerage Board – streamlined their bill collection systems after the 1999 survey. With PAC’s assistance, the Bangalore Development Authority developed its own report card, which it used to obtain feedback from customers on corruption and to identify weaknesses in service delivery. The Bangalore City Corporation and the Bangalore Development Authority also initiated a joint forum of representatives from non-governmental organizations and public officials to identify solutions to high-priority problems. Two large public hospitals in the city that had received very poor rankings agreed to support an initiative designed by a non-governmental organization to set up “help desks” to assist patients and to train their staff to be more responsive to patients’ needs.

PAC acknowledges that a number of factors caused the dramatic improvement in agency performance between 1999 and 2003. These include pressure from international donor organizations and a responsive chief minister in the state, who encouraged civic participation in governance. However, ten years of sustained advocacy and media publicity regarding the report card results also played a major role in pressuring city agencies to improve their service delivery.

Challenges

Completing a CRC project can take six months to a year, or even longer. PAC has assisted groups in many other countries seeking to implement its methodology and has developed a list of issues that any group interested in conducting a report card survey should consider.

i. Requirement of a Strong Lead Institution: The ultimate success of a CRC project depends in large part on the institution that leads it. This institution should be legitimate in the eyes of those who will be surveyed and familiar with the locality where the CRC is to take place. It should also be experienced in conducting surveys and willing to work with multiple stakeholders drawn from throughout society. It is also helpful if the institution can draw from an established network of organizations and individuals to supplement its own skills and personnel.

ii. Evaluation of the Socio-Political Context: Governments must be able to respond to feedback in order for a CRC to produce meaningful changes. Furthermore, the relationships among different sectors of society (government, media, civil society, businesses, and citizens) must be conducive to the use of a CRC. Citizens must not be too intimidated to respond to survey questions, and the safety of enumerators and respondents should not be in question.

iii. Development of an Advocacy Strategy: Advocacy efforts should always be directed to the level of government (local, state, or national) responsible for the service being assessed. Further, the group conducting the CRC survey should cultivate strong relationships with local media, which can help disseminate the survey results and thereby build the pressure needed to effect change in a service provider’s practices. The greater the amount of media censorship in a country, the less likely it is that a group’s advocacy efforts will succeed.

Advocacy efforts will be even less likely to succeed if service providers are not willing to change their practices. Including some survey results that reflect favorably upon the service provider will help the provider feel more comfortable with the process. Repeating the report card at regular intervals also gives providers input on whether their efforts to improve services are working, which could even create an incentive for them to become involved in the survey process.

iv. Requirement of Technical Skills: The group conducting the CRC survey may need technical assistance from outside groups on such issues as survey techniques, details of local service provision, and survey fieldwork. Universities and private companies can be good places to find people with skills in these technical areas.

v. Consideration of Cost: The cost of a CRC survey will vary depending on factors such as the sample size, the number of personnel needed to conduct the survey and the level of training they will need, communication and information equipment needed (computers, phones, etc.), the cost of printing questionnaires, wages to be paid to interviewers and supervisors, any fees due to outside agencies to which certain tasks have been outsourced, and travel and dissemination costs.

This case was excerpted from Our Money, Our Responsibility: A Citizens' Guide to Monitoring Government Expenditure *by Vivek Ramkumar (International Budget Partnership, 2008), available at www.internationalbudget.org.*