New Mechanisms for Public Accountability: The Indian Experience

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Abstract

This paper summarises some of the recent initiatives to enhance public accountability in India. These are divided into two categories: initiatives from the government and those that emanated primarily from civil society. India's economic and institutional reforms provided the setting in which these initiatives were launched.

Notable among the government's initiatives were the creation of citizen charters in important public services, legislation to facilitate the public's right to information, and experiments in e-governance in sectors and departments serving business and citizens in general. Civil society sought increased transparency and accountability through public hearings and campaigns, notably to demand greater access to information on public expenditure, generated and used public feedback on services through devices such as "report cards", and launched campaigns to increase transparency in the political (election) process. These experiments signal a clear shift of focus from the traditional "vertical" accountability mechanisms to mechanisms of a "horizontal" nature. The paper makes an assessment of these initiatives and notes the lessons to be learnt from them.

Introduction

Accountability refers to the process of holding persons or organisations responsible for performance as objectively as possible. The issues paper for the workshop has identified several categories of organisations as accountable for poverty reduction: national/local governments, international public organisations, transnational/local business, and NGOs, both international and national. In the Indian context, government and its agencies are the key players in the poverty reduction arena, judged by their own public policy pronouncements and commitments. International organisations and even NGOs are of marginal significance in India, unlike in many smaller countries. The commitment of business to poverty reduction is indirect and limited at best. Accountability issues pertaining to business will not therefore be discussed in this paper. Instead, the paper will focus primarily on the new mechanisms of public accountability that have emerged within government and the recent civil society initiatives that have sought to enhance public accountability in India.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide a useful backdrop for this discussion. By and large, most of the MDGs will be operationalised through a variety of public services provided to the poor. The primary responsibility for ensuring service provision to the poor will be that of the state, even if the services are actually delivered through other agents such as the private sector or NGOs. Thus infant mortality reduction

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and improved maternal health will call for more focused healthcare services. An enabling environment for income and employment generation will also require an active state role. All these are reasons why effective accountability mechanisms for poverty reduction should be institutionalised at all levels of government.

This paper is divided into four sections. It begins with a brief description of the Indian context and the attention given to accountability concerns in the decade of the 1990s when major economic reforms swept the country. Government initiatives that impinge on accountability are then discussed in Section 2. Civil society initiatives are the subject of Section 3. The final section summarises the lessons and implications of these experiences for poverty reduction.

1. Accountability in the Indian context

India is a large democratic country of a billion people. It has a federal government at the centre, 27 state governments, and over 200,000 (urban and rural) local governments. Most of the traditional mechanisms of accountability, both vertical and horizontal, are present in India. As a parliamentary democracy, it has elected legislatures that have oversight functions over the Executive and an independent judiciary that can hold both the legislative and executive arms of the state accountable. It has a variety of independent authorities and commissions that perform an accountability function vis-à-vis different parts of the government. The electoral process, the ultimate accountability mechanism in a democratic country, has performed well for over 50 years.

Nevertheless, all is not well with public accountability in India. Formal accountability systems are put in place for the most part, but they are not necessarily made to work. Many good laws have been enacted, but they are not always enforced or monitored. Public agencies are given mandates and funds, but their performance may not be properly assessed and suitable action taken to hold them accountable. Public audits of accounts and parliamentary reviews are done, but follow up actions may leave much to be desired. It is clear that the existence of formal mechanisms of accountability does not guarantee actual accountability on the ground. These discouraging outcomes have been attributed to a variety of factors. Collusion between those who are responsible for performance and those who are charged with their oversight due to the asymmetry of information and the "agency" problem, well-known weaknesses in civil society institutions, and the prevalence of corruption are among the factors often highlighted in this context. Poverty reduction has been a major casualty in this process. Many of the mechanisms listed in the issues paper can only create the enabling conditions for public accountability. This author's assessment is that without an aware and demanding civil society, it would be difficult to make these mechanisms work. It is for this reason that some of the recent civil society initiatives in India are narrated in a later section. These are the true "horizontal" accountability mechanisms with some promise, at least in India.

The economic crisis of 1991, many observers thought, would lead to a major reform of the functioning of the Indian state. Market reforms, liberalisation policies, etc., are supposed to result in a more responsive and accountable government. But a careful

review of the reforms of the 1990s shows that their focus did not go beyond macroeconomic management and the trade and industry sectors. Given the crisis situation, this was the right place to begin. These reforms did achieve a great deal and created a noticeable sense of movement in the economy. Subsequent political and economic developments, however, resulted in a slow down of the reform process. Reform of specific sectors, including public enterprises, for example, made little progress. Complex policy issues such as the reform of "exit policy" with reference to industry, downsizing of government bureaucracy, etc., were shelved for the most part or ignored. In a democratic setting, it is by no means easy to reach a consensus on such contentious issues and push through the needed reforms, especially when those who lead the reform movement are unsure of their own survival.

Most observers agree that "reforming the state" in the sense of reorienting its focus to improved performance and accountability was not high on the country's reform agenda, as the examples below testify. Liberalisation and deregulation of trade and industry did not imply the end of the state and its basic functions. The state was still the major provider of basic services to the people, regulator of important economic activities, and custodian of the law and order function. These basic functions are critical to the productivity of the people and of all the sectors of activity in which they are engaged. If the government were more responsive to people's needs and more transparent and efficient in its transactions, it would make the people, especially the poor, more productive and make India a better place to do business. Better infrastructure, easier access to information, an efficient legal system and enforcement mechanisms are precisely what a liberalised economy needs to compete effectively in the global environment. But these changes seldom come about as long as the political process and the quality and accountability of democratic institutions are themselves flawed.

2. Government initiatives

The pressure to enhance accountability could emanate from two different sources. Government is one potential source, but the precondition is that the political and bureaucratic leadership is motivated to usher in reform. Alternatively, the pressure for increased public accountability may come from the civil society. Civil society institutions such as citizens' organisations and networks, independent media and think tanks are usually in the forefront in many countries to articulate the demand for these reforms. Both these constituencies, namely, political and bureaucratic leadership and civil society institutions, have been, by and large, weak in the pressure they have exerted for reforming the Indian state.

Nevertheless, there are some new initiatives worthy of mention as they have the potential to enhance public accountability in general and to contribute to the goal of poverty reduction. We will be selective and focus the narrative on three new mechanisms for accountability that have been promoted by the government.

In addition to the standard economic reforms (liberalisation of trade, industry, etc.), the Government of India (GOI) initiated a major review by the mid-nineties of a wide range

of laws and regulations that underpinned the working of the key sectors of the economy. This was a cumbersome and time-consuming task and progress varied widely across the sectors. More progress was clearly achieved in the financial sector, company law, etc., that are more directly linked to the key economic sectors. Other areas, such as agriculture and poverty reduction, have lagged behind.

2.1 Right to information laws

Instead of reviewing the entire set of legal system reform that has been under way for some years, we shall highlight a major reform that has in part created a new accountability enabling mechanism: the promotion of the "right to information" through legislation. Its relevance to liberalisation and poverty reduction needs no special emphasis, given the severity of the information asymmetry problem. Unfortunately, some have viewed the right to information as a lawyers' concern because of the importance the latter have given to information access as an aid to contestation in courts. But a more transparent government is equally important for all citizens and especially for the poor.

India's Official Secrets Act of 1923 is the law that governs the disclosure of official information to outsiders by the state. Despite the reform of a similar Act in the UK in 1989, there has been no serious effort to modify the Indian Act until the present time. Successive governments have repeated their resolve to update the Act and even drafted amended bills, but the Parliament is yet to act on the draft. The latest information is that the draft approved by the Cabinet is awaiting action by the Parliament.

Meanwhile, six state governments have passed their own Right to Information Acts. The states of Tamil Nadu, Goa, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Delhi passed their acts between 1997 and 2001. Some of these laws are progressive while others have serious flaws. The laws vary in terms of standards and the degree of protection of the citizen's right to information. Some laws have a long list of exceptions that keep out a great deal of information from the public domain. The Government of India (GOI) bill does not have an independent appeals mechanism. Nor does it contain any penalties for delay or denial of information. Furthermore, it does not provide for an independent monitoring agency.

The story of the governments' initiatives to enact right to information laws in the country amply testifies to the difficulties in moving forward with the liberalisation that we need in the infrastructure of accountability and governance. It is not merely a problem of getting the technical issues resolved, but rather one of creating a political consensus on the need for these basic reforms. There is no strong and well organised constituency in this field, unlike in the case of foreign investment and trade. On the other hand, there are strong interests within the bureaucracy which may feel threatened by the demand for increased access to information. Similarly, the fact that the Lok Pal (ombudsman) Bill has been in and out of the Parliament for decades shows the reluctance of the political leadership (of all parties) to create more openness and integrity in the functioning of the state. Ceremonial posts like governors are plenty, but India has attached low priority to the institution of ombudsman, an independent mechanism to deal with public grievances. European countries have had this tradition for centuries.

2.2 Citizens' charters

Let us now turn to another government initiative that has the potential to enhance public accountability for poverty reduction. The Cabinet Secretariat's Department of Personnel and Administrative Reforms launched in 1997 a programme to design and institutionalise "citizens' charters" for the services being rendered by the different ministries/ departments/ enterprises of GOI. The model adopted was based on the British citizens' charters that had already achieved a record of some repute in a wide range of public services such as water supply, electricity, public transport, health care, etc. A charter is an explicit statement of what a public agency is ready to offer as its services, the rights and entitlements of the people with reference to these services and the remedies available to them should problems and disputes arise in these transactions. It is a mechanism for augmenting the accountability and transparency of the public agencies interfacing with the people. It was expected that agencies would become more efficient and responsive to the people as a result and that the latter would become better informed and motivated to demand better public services. The potential impact of this reform could be enormous. Nearly three-fourths of the states' public expenditures are for the provision of a wide range of public services to the people. If charters could act as an aid to the efficient delivery of these services, it would certainly be a major accomplishment.

Responding to this initiative, a number of public agencies did prepare their own citizens' charters. The Department of Personnel has encouraged the state governments also to follow this approach wherever feasible in the states. In some states (for example, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh), there are several examples of charters being announced and put into effect. In the absence of a systematic assessment, it is difficult to say what impact this reform initiative has achieved. Some of the problems narrated below would seem to imply that a great deal of progress may not have been made.

Discussions with some of the public agencies that have announced citizens' charters have brought out the pitfalls in the implementation of this initiative. First of all, there is a tendency to replicate the approach without ensuring that the requisite pre-conditions have been met. Thus, the agency has to do a lot of homework to ensure that the prescribed norms and conditions can in fact be met by its staff. This may call for restructuring of the agency, deployment of new resources and equipment, and staff training and motivation. Such preparatory steps were not always taken. As a result, staff are not aware of the implications of their charter nor equipped to stand by it even if they are aware. In the end, we have agency heads who have followed the orders as required, but without any commitment to making an impact through the actions taken.

Second, the success of charters depends greatly on the education and involvement of the public. When the public is unaware of and unable to demand their rights, it is unlikely that charters can be effective. This could in part be due to the agency's own failure to disseminate information to the public on the charter. It may happen because of the technical jargon used in a charter that can inhibit people's understanding of their rights and remedies.

Third, charters will work only when the results count in the evaluation of the agency and its leadership and staff. If there is no penalty for the agency or its staff for non-compliance with its charter, serious attention will not be paid to its implementation. If the agency continues to get its budget and its leaders get promotions without any reference to their performance with respect to the charter, they are unlikely to treat it as a high priority objective. In fact, very few charters have any provision for paying a penalty for non-compliance. On all these counts, the British citizens' charters were more thorough and well planned. The UK Government invested a lot of effort in creating executive agencies with greater autonomy so that they could have the flexibility to comply with the charter's demands. Chief executives were appointed to head these agencies with the clear understanding that their performance assessments would be linked to the charters. The Indian citizens' charters have focussed narrowly on charter statements, without paying adequate attention to the preconditions and safeguards necessary to make them work effectively.

2.3 Experiments in e-governance

In the last five years, state governments in India have initiated several experiments in e-governance that have the potential to empower poor people and enable them to access essential services speedily and with minimal harassment. Most of them pertain to the delivery of essential services that matter for the poor. Some have facilitated the flow of market information to small farmers, thus enabling them to get better prices for their crops. Information technology (IT) has been used by some governments to speed up and simplify the issue of land records and ration cards. IT-based networks have been created that provide prompt information to the rural poor on the status of their application for government loans and other benefits. Many of these experiments need scaling up to make an enduring impact on poverty reduction.

E-governance has been perceived by many people as the preserve of the elite. But the initiatives clearly testify to its power in holding public agencies more accountable for the cause of poverty reduction. The transparency it offers to the poor makes it easier for the poor to deal with the government. Its speed helps to minimise the inefficiencies and high costs the poor tend to experience in accessing public services. Its replicability will facilitate extending these services even to those in scattered rural locations. There are some pre-requisites for the success of IT applications, but we shall not deal with them here. Suffice it to say that IT is a good example of a modern technology that can be harnessed in the service of poverty reduction.

Civil society initiatives for accountability

There is a wide range of ongoing people's movements and non-governmental initiatives in India. Most of them are concerned with specific causes, sectoral issues and local crises. The environmental movement, farmers' movements to address common issues, the public interest litigation movement and the consumer movement are good examples of this approach. By and large, such movements emerge as a response to the perceived failure of governments to anticipate or tackle common issues of concern to large sections of the people. Most of them call for policy actions and changes by government or interventions

by government to rectify specific wrongs such as displacement of tribals or the poor by large dams or other projects. But these are not necessarily movements aimed at "reforming the state" or improving accountability in the broader sense of these terms. Governance-oriented movements of any significance are very few in India. We discuss below three such movements which, though local in scope at present, have the potential to assume national proportions. Though limited in their reach at present, their relevance to the accountability for poverty reduction will be obvious. They signify pressures from below to achieve the same set of accountability objectives that the government initiatives are also pursuing.

3.1 Right to Information Movement: MKSS

MKSS (Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan) is an organisation of rural people that has become well known in India for its use of public hearings as an aid to accountability. Based in Rajasthan, MKSS has pioneered a novel struggle by groups of the rural poor to access information from government on schemes and benefits that they are entitled to. It has held "public hearings" that have encouraged ordinary citizens to speak out about abuses in public works and schemes from which they are supposed to benefit. These hearings have exposed the ways in which public officials have siphoned off large amounts of funds from public works budgets. MKSS's struggle to access information from public offices on these matters led its leadership to take up the matter with the state's Chief Minister.

The first victory for the movement was the government notification under the Panchayats Act that records of all panchayat expenditure could be inspected by the people. Subsequently, the movement won the right to photocopy the records. Rajasthan passed the Right to Information Act in 2000, a development that was influenced greatly by the pressure of MKSS. There have, of course, been problems with the new Act and its provisions. But it does show the influence that a people's movement can bring to bear on a reluctant government to take steps to be more transparent and accountable in its transactions with the people. MKSS has taken its struggle to several districts of Rajasthan and works with similar groups in other states on right to information issues.

3.2 Reform of the Political Election Process

Any agenda for reforming the state must pay attention to the manner in which democracy works in the country. Many feel that at the root of the problem is the inadequacy of the electoral process. Government has commissioned reports and studies on this subject, but has not been able to initiate any serious reform in this regard. It is this gap that has motivated groups of citizens in different states to address issues of electoral transparency and reform. The largest of these movements is Lok Satta in Andhra Pradesh, which has a large membership and active units at the district level in the state. In the last state elections, Lok Satta organised information campaigns on candidates contesting the elections and set up a people's commission to investigate complaints against candidates by citizens. These efforts have been well documented and widely disseminated. It is an attempt to strengthen political accountability by seeking greater transparency in the selection of candidates for election by the political parties. Through this initiative, citizen groups are asking political parties to be more accountable to the people.

On a smaller scale, similar information dissemination on candidates have been attempted by the Public Affairs Centre (PAC) in Bangalore in collaboration with several local citizens groups, in Chennai by Catalysts Trust and in Mumbai by Bombay First. There has been active networking and sharing of information among all the groups. The novelty of the approach lies in the focus on the empowerment of the people through information dissemination. It has for the first time also made voters aware of the need to be better informed about the persons they are electing instead of being influenced by slogans and persuasion alone. The Election Commission itself does not have any such background information on the candidates. However, as a result of recent public interest litigation asking that information dissemination on candidates be made mandatory, the Supreme Court of India has directed the Election Commission to draft the rules to make this a standard practice. The Government has now passed an ordinance to comply with the court directive[2]. Again, here we have an example of a civil society initiative that has resulted in the Executive and the Judiciary taking positive steps to strengthen accountability at the political level.

3.3 Citizen feedback for enhanced accountability in public services

Public services such as water supply, electricity and health and sanitation have been in disarray all over the country, and in particular with reference to the poorer sections of society. Of all the levels of government, it is the local level that has been most neglected. Unresponsive and corrupt service providers have exacerbated the problem. In several cities, small movements have emerged to protest this state of neglect and to demand greater accountability from the authorities concerned. PAC in Bangalore is a non-profit, voluntary organisation that has catalysed and supported such movements in a number of cities. The approach has been to generate the kind of knowledge and information on the problems facing citizens and that could be turned into a form of "citizens' voice" and external pressure for change.

One of the problems that citizens face in addressing service-related issues is their lack of knowledge and information on these matters. They end up protesting and writing to the press on an anecdotal basis that may solve some individual problems but do not solve the systemic problems in service provision. PAC's report cards on public services have given citizen groups in several cities a versatile tool that gives them more power and leverage in dealing with the public bureaucracy and politicians[3]. Both organisations of the middle class and the poor have resorted to the use of report cards. The print media have also used this tool well and acted an as ally to the civic movements in some cities. Examples of what the report cards contain and how they are used for advocacy and public action are discussed in this author's recent book <u>Holding the State to Account: Citizen Monitoring in Action </u>(Books for Change, Bangalore, 2002).

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[2] Currently, there is a debate on this issue in India. All the political parties jointly declared that disclosure of information on candidates was not a desirable move! It was the public and the media that stood with the Supreme Court.

[3] See "References" at the end of this paper for examples of report card documents on urban services.

To illustrate how the report card approach works, we narrate below the case of the maternity homes in Bangalore, a city of six million. These health centres were managed by the city municipal corporation (BMP). BMP's maternity homes represent the only decentralised set of health facilities in the city that are accessed by relatively low income women and children. A network of 55 new outreach centres has recently been created through a World Bank project to expand and further strengthen the services of the maternity homes. While this expansion and upgrading of the health facilities for the poor are commendable, doubts have been raised as to whether they will be properly utilised and maintained.

There were two major concerns about the maternity homes and the way they were managed:

- In the view of many observers, their quality of service and responsiveness to patients have left much to be desired, and accountability was low;
- Patients have complained about the different ways in which unofficial payments (bribes) are extracted from them although health services are supposed to be free.

If this is true, nothing could be more unjust and inhuman. The patients come from the poorest households with very few options. They are women in distress who are being ill-treated when they are least able to defend themselves. Since these allegations about what goes on within the system are anecdotal in nature, it would have been unfair to draw conclusions without a systematic investigation of the issues involved. It is for this reason that PAC undertook a comparative survey of maternity homes and the new outreach centres all over the city jointly with several interested NGOs. A total of 500 patients and 70 staff of these facilities were interviewed. The major findings of this mini report card were as follows:

- The overall satisfaction of patients was lowest with the services of the maternity homes. Only a third rated them as good while 71% and 60% considered them unsatisfactory, while the outreach centres received much better satisfaction ratings.

- Only 39% of the patients of the maternity homes claimed that they received all medicines free, as opposed to 63% in outreach centres. Maternity homes also led in taking bribes for injections. But the staff said that medicines were given free to all patients.

- Cleanliness of toilets is an indication of standards of hygiene and sanitation. Here, patients rated maternity homes lower (43%) than the outreach centres (83%).

- Maternity homes were rated the lowest also in terms of staff behaviour towards patients. But the gap between them and the outreach centres was much smaller in this case.

- The most distressing finding was the prevalence of corruption. While none of the facilities seems corruption free, maternity homes stood out for the severity of the problem. Payments were demanded or expected by staff for almost all services.

- If a poor woman paid for all services, it would have cost her over Rs. 1000 ($ 28) for a delivery. It was reported that a nursing home might give her hassle free and better quality service for Rs. 2000. A rough estimate of the bribes being paid in all these facilities was between Rs one and two crores (ten to twenty million) annually.

- Most of the staff denied the practice of corruption. They did complain about the constraint of facilities, and shortage of staff, supplies and resources. Doctors emphasised the need to improve patient awareness, especially about the need to be regular in their visits.

The evidence presented above clearly makes the case for urgent reforms in municipal health care facilities for the poor in Bangalore. At the core of the problem is the highly unsatisfactory state of the services of the maternity homes. If the present conditions continue, the newly created outreach centres would also deteriorate and become part of the pool of corruption and low quality that characterise the system. PAC and other NGOs involved in the study felt that it would be a great loss if fresh investments being made in the new centres were rendered unproductive by the continued apathy of the establishment while paying lip service to the uplifting of the poor.

On the brighter side, reforming maternity homes was considered by all concerned a manageable task given their relatively small size and the compact population they served. The Chief Minister's concern for good governance and control of corruption offered a window of opportunity for BMP to design and carry out an agenda of reform. PAC and its partners felt that if promptly done, reforms would have a strong demonstration effect on the rest of the system also.

To stimulate the reform process, PAC assembled several experts and NGOs working with the urban poor for a discussion about the options that might be considered by BMP to improve its health services to the poor. While what is presented below does not amount to a fully-fledged strategy, it contains elements of reform that the group considered essential and mutually reinforcing.

- An effective oversight mechanism should be created to monitor the activities of the maternity homes. A board of visitors consisting of 5-7 persons could play this role through quarterly meetings to review the operations, needs and plans of each maternity home. A board could also check and eliminate unnecessary overlaps between maternity homes and outreach centres. The board should include 4-5 independent experts and activists from the locality who are concerned about the urban poor and health. A corporator and another official could also be nominated to the board. If a board for each home is impractical, perhaps a board could cover about four maternity homes located in contiguous wards. These boards should report to the Municipal Commissioner or his deputy.

- A patients' charter should be created for the maternity homes. It should publicise the services offered, time deadlines and terms of service, fees, remedies in case of problems, patients' rights and duties. This could be the first service of BMP for which a charter could be designed on an experimental basis. Staff should participate in this process and be trained to implement it.

- Though the services are free, the reality is that poor women have to pay for them in a majority of cases. They pay, but have no assurance of quality or rights. It is proposed that BMP move to a system of user charges. The idea is not to recover the full costs of the services, but to let patients share the costs so that they have a right to receive the services. Norms for the contributions could be published. Delivery is a predictable event and not an emergency. They can save for this event and pay rather than be faced with extortion when in distress.

- The fund thus created should be used for the maintenance and improvement of the facility where it is collected. It will be an incentive for the doctors and staff if the money can be used to improve their facility. Whether a part of the fund could be used to pay a bonus to the staff is a matter for further consideration.

- In the case of outreach centres, it is imperative that provision be made for the diversification of their management and control. When they revert to BMP, the issue is whether interested NGOs, foundations, teaching hospitals, etc., could be brought in to operate the services with a maintenance grant from BMP. IPP centres have the potential to become community service centres. IPP infrastructure could be used after office hours for meetings, teaching, and private practice and other services beneficial to the community. If this approach is adopted, the maintenance costs and BMP's burden can be reduced as additional income will be generated by the centres through the use of their facilities. Good NGOs may have an incentive to work along these lines as it will help further their own mission.

- Even if these actions are taken, there is a need to empower poor women to demand their rights and to stand up against abuse. The only way to do this is by creating support groups of women in different slums. Some NGOs have already agreed that they will play this role in their areas of work. They have also expressed interest in operating help desks in the maternity homes for patients. Support groups could prepare and brief pregnant women and accompany them on visits to maternity homes. This function properly belongs to the voluntary sector. IPP centres could be used as a base for organising support group activities.

The package of reforms summarised above was discussed by PAC with municipal authorities and health professionals. Although some reservations were expressed about the feasibility of reform, BMP has now decided to accept these proposals and to implement them in a phased manner. Thus a patients' charter has been prepared. It has been decided to introduce user charges for selected services. A helpline desk is being experimented with by an NGO in one maternity home. Similarly, it has been decided to hand over the management of a maternity home to an interested NGO. BMP has also decided to set up boards of visitors to groups of maternity homes and the outreach centres in different wards. Health professionals and local activists are being sought to join these boards for specified periods.

All these responses are clearly experimental in nature. What is significant is that a civil society initiative has led to an increased level of accountability in a large public agency. Whether these efforts will be sustained will depend on senior officials' continuity on the job and the commitment of local NGOs and experts. The starting point, of course, was the mini report card that PAC launched and the advocacy efforts that it initiated along with its partners.

The report card on services as an accountability mechanism can be scaled up to any level of government. PAC has recently prepared a report card on five basic services on an all India basis. The services covered are drinking water, health care, primary education, public distribution of food, and road transport. All of them are essential services for the poor in particular. Yet, their feedback on these services is seldom heard! The report card is based on a survey of 37000 households distributed over 24 states and 115 districts. The findings were discussed widely in the press and advocacy work is currently in progress. To bring out the report card's implications for accountability, we present below the findings of the survey pertaining to one state, namely, Karnataka. The comparisons in the boxes are between the districts within the state. A seminar was recently held by PAC with the senior officials and civil society groups in the state to discuss jointly the findings and their implications for policy and action. It is an example of a horizontal accountability mechanism at work.

4. Lessons from the Indian experience

What have these movements achieved? Have they made a difference in terms of the problems they set out to solve? What lessons can be learnt from these experiences?

The initiatives discussed above are relatively new movements and no definitive studies of their impact and potential exist. But a cursory review shows that in their limited local contexts they have made a difference. They have been able to energise and organise large numbers of people around issues of governance and accountability that had not attracted this kind of attention. They have been able to dialogue with public authorities on issues of common concern and make some impact in terms of policies and action. In PAC's case, there are several examples of how new movements have drawn upon our work and built further on this foundation. A recent case is "Janaagraha", which has involved civic groups in most wards in Bangalore to create rudimentary public works budgets for their areas by putting pressure on the elected corporators at budget time. The basic building blocks of this approach came partly from PAC's work. PAC has also supported and assisted this movement more directly.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that these movements are essentially modest efforts led by persons with a certain commitment to their causes and with some ability to mobilise the resources and people necessary to keep their activities going. The challenges facing them can be summed up as follows:

1. Scaling up the movement for increased accountability to cover larger areas and wider sets of issues in governance has not been easy. It is not merely a problem of resource constraints. People's movements are inspired by local issues that attract intense attention by those affected by them. The lead groups involved tend to be small and cohesive. Scaling up will gather momentum only when people in other locations (eg., other cities or states) share the same concerns with similar intensity. This is not always the case. In some cities, civic groups may have other priority concerns. They may not willingly shoulder the responsibility to replicate the same kind of movement that some other group initiated in another location. Of course, it is possible to expand a movement in a bureaucratic fashion by setting up branches or offices in other places. But the quality of leadership and engagement in other places may be of a much lower order than in the pioneer location.

2. Resource constraints can also discourage the expansion of people's movements. One may be able to raise local funds and assemble volunteers because there is local interest in a problem such as public service failure. But there are very few sources of funding available in India to support a local effort that is to be scaled up nationally. More developed countries are not subject to this barrier to the same extent. In India, philanthropy is more inclined to charity-related causes and not to issues of governance. There are many trusts and foundations in India that are also hesitant to criticise governments and to be seen as confrontational.

3. When movements emerge in the face of the crises that communities or groups face, there is a tendency for them to wane as the crises get defused or moderated. Many protest movements go through such phases. Institutionalisation of the movements thus becomes a casualty, especially when they tend to spread themselves thin. This can happen in any country. But in the more developed countries, one finds such movements staying alive, engaging in advocacy and information sharing even after the original crisis that brought them into being disappears. This staying power is no doubt due to easier availability of financial support. It may also be due to the willingness of small groups of committed persons to devote their careers to such causes without expecting to dominate the movement. Some movements perform best when they come together as a network. On many issues, they may work locally, but come together when they need to confront larger common issues. Their pace of progress and impact may then be slow, but their institutionalisation will tend to be smoother and more sustainable.

What can we learn from the reform initiatives of the state? Will the government push for greater accountability with respect to the goal of poverty reduction?

1. The Indian experience with reform is that poverty reduction will be a low priority as far as accountability is concerned. Despite the rhetoric about poverty reduction, it was macroeconomic stability, and trade and industry liberalisation that were at the top in the reform agenda. This is not surprising in view of the need for an enabling environment for development in the country. But it is not at all clear that poverty issues will receive priority attention once this task is accomplished. This is because the kind of external pressure that is exerted to address macroeconomic issues is seldom at work in the context of poverty reduction. Poverty is a more complex issue to deal with. So lip service will be paid to MDGs. But accountability mechanisms to ensure their achievement may not be put in place. The importance of external pressure on governments to be accountable for what they proclaim cannot be overemphasised.

2. It is easier for governments to create institutions, laws and other mechanisms than to ensure their effectiveness. Thus, many "horizontal" accountability institutions will be set up. But it will be difficult for the poor to access them. The problems highlighted at the beginning of the paper will make it difficult for the government to make these institutions accountable for good performance. The test of accountability does not lie

in the declaration of intentions, but in the actions taken by public agencies to implement them. Effectiveness is a function of both good policies and their efficient implementation. Poverty reduction requires mechanisms of accountability that will monitor and assess the actions taken. It is when corrective actions are taken in light of systematic feedback or assessments that we can be sure that accountability exists. It has not been easy for India's public agencies to design and deploy such mechanisms in support of poverty reduction. Hence the importance of citizen feedback and civic activism as a countervailing force to demand increased public accountability in India. One could go a step further and ask why user feedback should not be built into the assessments of poverty reduction programmes and services by governments and donors.

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