

Basic Services for Rural People

by

V.K Parigi, Workstream Leader (Accountable Government)
Kurian Thomas, Knowledge Manager (Welfare and Poverty Alleviation)
Centre for Good Governance, Hyderabad

There is a general consensus on the need to improve the quality of services provided to public particularly the poor. The quality of services is mainly constrained by managerial inefficiency and not by lack of resources. The paper discusses the strategies which can be adopted for enhancing the effectiveness of delivering basic services. This includes increased public provisions, targeted delivery of the resources through defined, transparent and decentralized procedures, benchmarking of the quality of services, involving the consumer/citizen in determining the quality and time elements in such delivery. The paper also outlines various mechanisms for analyzing the effectiveness, efficiency and economy of public services.

November 2004

Basic Services for Rural People

V.K Parigi & Kurian Thomas
Centre for Good Governance, Hyderabad

As per the directive principles of state policy enshrined in Part IV of 'the Constitution of India', 'the State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases of deserved want.' This clearly indicates that service delivery has been a major focus for the government in making policies. Many programmes aimed at delivering basic services to the citizens are formulated. However, implementation or the delivery of these programmes hasn't been very effective and delivery of basic public services varies widely.

Development objectives should not just be defined just in terms of increases in GDP or per capita income but also in terms of enhancement of human well being. This includes not only an adequate level of consumption of food and other types of consumer goods but also access to basic social services especially education, health, drinking water and basic sanitation. It also includes the expansion of economic and social opportunities for all individuals and groups, reduction in disparities, and greater participation in decision making. A great deal of attention in development research and policy circles has recently focused on the efficacy of public expenditures in providing basic services to poor people, and on how actually making services work for the poor is constrained by weak incentives of public agents (*World Development Report 2004*, Fosu and Ryan, 2004). Strategically this would help in enhancing the capacity of the poor to take advantage of economic opportunities.

How accountable are locally elected governments for the delivery of local public services? There is a general consensus on the need to improve the quality of services provided to public particularly the poor. The quality of services is mainly constrained by managerial inefficiency and not by lack of resources. Providing basic service delivery refers to the process of holding persons or organisations responsible for performance as objectively as possible. A system of incentive-disincentive may be built in, to encourage and promote improved service delivery of basic services. It is imperative that performance linked incentives should only be based on objective assessment of performance and should not give room for patronage of any kind. The primary responsibility for ensuring service provision to the poor will be that of the state, even if the services are partially delivered through other agents such as the private sector or NGOs. So long as the District Administration remains the focal point as facilitator, provider or arbitrator, it has to take the responsibility for delivering services and ensuring that outcomes are commensurate with the inputs and performance. Making services work requires changing the institutional relationship among key actors and incentivizing them. Too often, services fail poor people in access, in quantity, in quality. Services delivery to the poor people can be improved when service provision system remains people-centric and when the poor have choices. When the poor can avoid poor providers, while rewarding good providers

with their clientele, and when their voices are heard by those in power - that is, when service providers have incentives to serve the poor, services improve.

There are three ways in which services can be improved for the poor by facilitating organisation of the poor:

- (i) By increasing poor clients' choice and power over service providers and their participation in service delivery, so that they can monitor and discipline providers;
- (ii) By raising poor citizens' voice, through the ballot box and making information widely available; service can be increased by demand for better public services and forcing politicians to act;
- (iii) By rewarding the effective and penalizing the ineffective delivery of services to poor people.

The Government may facilitate the exercise of client power and voice by the poor people by assisting them in organisation. The capacity of the public sector to meet the health care, education and other basic services described above remains severely limited. While much progress has been made, substantial changes are required to ensure access to adequate information and services, and the sustainability of improved services and systems. Public services must match their responsibilities with their capabilities. Often governments have expanded their role so far that they have become ineffective in providing basic services, and have made a disproportionate claim on public resources.

Ensuring efficient delivery of services in major areas of public interface could be considered through enduring systems and wide reforms in the areas of food and civil supplies, agriculture, land records, land registration, education, health, rural development, transport and power. Increased public provisions, targeted delivery of the resources through defined, transparent and decentralized procedures, benchmarking of the quality of services to be provided and involving the consumer/citizen in determining the quality and time elements in such delivery would thus need due consideration.

The basic service for rural people has to be focused on how to:

- i. Deepen democratic self-government and strengthen participatory forms of development; decentralisation of responsibilities to the elected local government is seen increasingly as a key strategy for improving effectiveness of basic services;
- ii. Reform the state, modes of governance and methods of government so as to give citizens greater voice and influence in decision-making;
- iii. Enhance the accountability of government and the responsiveness of public; this involves enabling the local people to be involved in the planning and management of services;
- iv. Identification of citizen service needs and expectations based on citizen surveys and taking citizen priorities into account (user need analysis);

- v. Think of people as customers rather than beneficiaries, trust in the efficacy of collaborating with citizens and take measures to build trust among citizens;
- vi. Create single window cells for one-stop user-friendly service delivery, reducing waiting time and providing service within assured time frame;
- vii. Minimise transaction costs and ensure cost-effective service provision;
- viii. Develop user feedback mechanisms such as Citizen's Report Card surveys to better plan and implement service provision;
- ix. Provide transparency in administrative systems which enable the citizen to assert his rights and accountability mechanisms in the government to establish strong client focus in service delivery by public agencies.
- x. Encourage Self-Help Groups, NGOs, Community Based Organizations, Consumer Organisations and Civil Society Groups by providing skills for effective participation in governance;
- xi. Provide easy access of people to Government offices and public servants; and
- xii. Empower citizens through capacity building programme for civil society organizations with public-private-people partnerships.
- xiii. Policies to effectively address the needs of the population, and especially the poor;
- xiv. Increase the effectiveness of public policies and service delivery;
- xv. Enhance social capital by fostering social cohesion and trust within local communities;
- xvi. Provide dispute-resolution mechanisms to manage conflict peacefully at the local level;
- xvii. Refocusing the role of district administration in improving the service delivery would also gain significance. The following could be attempted:
 - a) Identify the points of citizen interface which need attention in critical areas so that the quality of service delivery can be improved and benchmarks for performance laid down.
 - b) Capacity building in districts/panchayati raj institutions/urban local bodies – project formulation and implementation capabilities would require to be suitably enhanced by creating district level training resources, mainly to ensure that reforms are systemic and not transitory/based on individual efforts of a district collector.
 - c) Transparency in functions and allotment/utilization of resources - besides demystifying the processes and procedures in allocation of resources, for ensuring optimal utilization of resources concurrent social audit to be introduced.

- d) Evaluation of services - development of appropriate cost, time and quality benchmarks for delivery outcomes. This is particularly true in the areas of education, health, public distribution etc. which have a large citizen interface.
- e) Review of old practices and processes – streamlining and simplifying of procedures with concurrent changes in the associated rules and regulations along with examining the feasibility of introducing IT as a means of improving the processes.

Improved Public Service Delivery depends on the following

- Transparency in administrative systems which enables the citizen to assert his rights, and accountability mechanisms in the government to establish strong client focus in service delivery by public agencies.
- Value for money and efficiency and productivity in operations in public service delivery through bench marking of services and quality certification such as ISO 9000, ISI etc.
- Accountability which means that in case of failure to deliver the services or delay, the concerned officials in the government will be brought to book and compensation awarded to the citizen.
- Easy access and availability of public servants to the citizens.
- Reengineering of government departments to simplify processes, forms and procedures, rules and regulations with a view to make these people driven and not rule driven.
- Involvement of citizens’ groups, voluntary associations, professional bodies, universities and other civil society groups in the monitoring of public services and performance review of government officials.
- Strong measures against corruption and summary punishment of government officials found collecting bribes from citizens.
- Use of IT to improve the citizen administration interface and improve easy access to information.
- Responsive public officials willing to listen to the grievances of the citizens and ready for redressal. A good complaint management system for every department of the government with citizen advisory committees to oversee the grievance management system.

The quality of service delivery and accountability of delivery system, be it for health, primary education or childcare and education, needs to be ensured. The effectiveness, efficiency and economy of public service can be analyzed through citizen charters and various external audits such as social audit, peoples’ audit and report cards

1. Citizens’ Charters

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.

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. However, in the absence of a systematic assessment, it is difficult to say what impact this reform initiative has achieved.

2. Performance Reports

The report card exercise gathers citizen feedback on performance of public agencies and disseminates the findings to the public, thus exerting public pressure on the agencies to initiate reforms.

An assessment of key public services is being prepared by Public Affairs Centre¹, Bangalore which provides a database and a set of benchmarks to measure the progress and performance of basic services over a period of time. Based on a survey conducted over four months in 2001 in 24 states, and covering 37,000 households, this study focuses on the five basic public services that are of special concern to the poorer sections of society: drinking water, health and sanitation, education and childcare, public distribution system (fair price shops), and road transport. The survey compares state-level performance on these five service types with respect to citizens' access to facilities, usage of public services, quality/reliability of public services and satisfaction with the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of service delivery. In overall terms, drinking water is found to be ahead of other services; however, in terms of access, it lags behind the rest. Dependence on public sources is found to be high for PDS and primary education and low for road transport, health services and drinking water. Reliability of services is found to be relatively high for drinking water (public sources) and health, and low for PDS, primary schools and road transport. A significant proportion of users are only partially satisfied with the provision of these services; services with a high element of human interaction are associated with significantly lower satisfaction levels. High income levels and State infrastructure spending do not by themselves, the study concludes, ensure a higher quality of governance. On the other hand, the poorer and more marginalized sections of society have a generally low level of access to facilities, due to both low income levels and to other circumstances, such as distance from state funded services. Such studies on performance reports will provide better accountability in providing basic services to the citizens.

3. Role Clarity

There is still a lot of confusion about the roles and responsibilities of different functionaries. It is highly essential to fix the functions and job charts of functionaries without overlap or ambiguity to ensure effective delivery of basic services.

¹ The goal of PAC is to improve governance in India by strengthening civil society institutions in their interactions within the state. For further information see: www.pacindia.org

4. Social Audit

Social audit is an independent evaluation of the performance of an organisation as it relates to the attainment of its social obligation. In other words, Social audit may be defined as an in-depth scrutiny and analysis of working of any public utility vis-a-vis its social relevance. Social audit is a tool through which government departments can plan, manage and measure non-financial activities intended for providing basic services for rural people. Social audit of administration means understanding the administrative system and its internal dynamics from the angle of what they mean for the vast majority of the people, who are not essentially a part of the state or its machinery or the ruling class of the day, for whom the entire machinery of government is meant to work.

Following are the main objectives of Social Audit:

- It permits the stakeholders in the organisation to affect its behaviour and to influence future policy.
- It allows the organisation to report on its achievements in a way that is based upon verified evidence rather than unsubstantiated claims.
- Finally, social audit enables the organisation to improve its social performance in ways that is inclusive, participatory, transparent and measurable.

Social audit is an innovative mechanism which can create the enabling conditions for public accountability. However, without an aware and demanding civil society, it would be difficult to make social audit work at the field level. Social audit is proposed as supplemental to conventional audit to help public agencies to understand their performance as perceived by the stake-holders and improve performance.

5. Community Audit

The community audit would include general audit in grama sabha or ward sabha, audit of specific items by stake-holders and concurrent community audit of public works by the benefited groups. Special grama sabha meetings would be convened with advance notice to do the community auditing.

6. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPS)

One major reason for the limited supply of basic services, particularly to the poor, is the heavy reliance on government resources. Thus, there is a need to seek alternate and more sustainable channels for overcoming government budgetary constraints in providing basic services to the poor. Central and state governments and the private sector are developing plans for PPPs for improved public service delivery that incorporates the provision of basic services to the poor which is found as the alternate way to extend basic services to the poor.

7. Rural Decentralization

Rural decentralization is an essential element which makes services work for the poor. The 73rd Amendment makes it imperative on the part of the Government to strengthen local government and management by devolving administrative and economic powers and responsibilities. The spirit of the Amendment calls for empowerment of the people with the Government directly involving the people in the management of the services they use. The suggestions for effective rural decentralization should include devolving specific and substantial executive powers in respect of the 29 Subjects listed in the 11th Schedule, activity mapping of functions devolved across all three

tiers and implementation of citizens' charters highlighting specific standards of service delivery.

8. GO-NGO Partnership

In recent years, the non-governmental sector in India has advanced its position in society. It has extended its reach both in terms of the scope of its activities and the breadth of community involvement in its work. At the same time, the NGO sector has worked to establish and develop strong relationships with governments. Increasingly, NGOs and governments have formed partnerships to provide a variety of services to the public. It is desirable to improve and strengthen the capability of administration to proactively partner with local community, particularly in remote areas. The development programmes should also build in synergy between the government and civil society institutions and should focus on people-centrieness of the administrative approaches.

An integrated community development programme has the potential to become more inclusive when the roles of the key development actors are well defined, separate and complementary, and when they are performed interdependently with respect to one another. Though there are no short cut solutions to these basic problems in service delivery, a major onus seems to lie upon NGOs.

Conclusion

Rural service delivery is a critical area that tends to be neglected. Merely redistributing resources across the different tiers of government is unlikely to solve the problem of public accountability and service delivery. A mission mode approach may be adopted clearly delineating the desired service levels, defining procedures with proper authority and flexibility to tailor implementation suiting the local conditions. Thereafter, time lines for various activities can be drawn and efforts for achieving them can be made. The feasibility of evaluating the performance of service providers by the consumers/citizens could be one area of innovation to ensure that delivery mechanism becomes more accountable and citizen-friendly.

The basic services required by the citizen could be identified and the standards of such services need to be specified. The arrangements required to provide services of the required standard would need to be worked out. Time schedules for provision of services and redressal of grievances related to the Government should also be laid down. This is an exercise each department will have to undertake. The ways of improving rural service delivery is qualitatively different and is very challenging. The good news in rural service delivery is that innovations are still possible. Innovations in financing, planning, and overall accountability measures can be introduced to good effect, to positive poverty outcomes, and be mainstreamed into policy. Local governments can greatly improve performance even without drastic personnel changes, given the right enabling factors. More fundamental interventions rooted in the political economy of incentives of governments are also required to make basic services work for poor people.

References

1. M. Harper 2000; Public service through Private Enterprises: Micro Privatisation for Improved Delivery.
2. Paul, Samuel (2002) Holding the State to Account: Citizens Monitoring in Action, Books for Change, Bangalore.
3. Paul, Samuel; New Mechanisms for Public Accountability: The Indian Experience, Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore
4. R. Govinda, India Education Report; A Profile of Basic Education. National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, 2002.
5. Roger Shotton, Local Governance and Pro-Poor Service Delivery, Summary of the Synthesis Paper on UNCDF Case Studies; ADB 2004.
6. S. Devarajan, S. Shah; Making Services Work for India's Poor; Economic and Political Weekly, February 2004.
7. Social Audit: A Tool for Performance Improvement and Outcome Measurement. Hyderabad: Centre for Good Governance, 2004.