

Keeping an eye on accountability

The participants at a recent workshop in Bangalore discussed ways of making administrative officials accountable to the public. Kathyayini Chamaraj reports

In the aftermath of the plague in Surat, ensuring accountability in public services and people's role in demanding this has assumed centre stage. Existing bodies like the office of the comptroller and auditor general (CAG) or reviews of budgets by standing committees of legislatures restrict themselves to an evaluation of macro-level inputs, such as of public expenditures, but they rarely concern themselves with evaluating how effectively the agency provided the service at the micro-level.

In recent times, the Consumer Protection Act (CPA) has provided a limited means to the public to seek redressal for deficient services, but it does not cover services such as road maintenance or garbage disposal for which no direct payment has been made. Moreover, litigations do not help in bringing about systematic reforms for improving accountability. What can governments and the people do to improve accountability, and how can government-community collaboration be fostered? These were some of the questions that were addressed at a recent national workshop in Bangalore on "Accountability in Public Services", co-sponsored by the National Foundation of India and the Public Affairs Centre.

The current situation in most public service agencies was exemplified by the experience of K. Jairaj, an IAS officer, during his tenure as the deputy commissioner of a district. He found that citizens visited district office seeking very small favours — like getting a ration card, a licence, a caste certificate etc. To obtain these, they had to run around the office, file applications, and finally in exasperation approach an agent and grease palms to get what was their due. The DC devised simpler application forms, which were received and scrutinised at a common reception point. The applicant would then be given an acknowledgement asking him to come on a particular day to collect his certificates. The system completely obviated the need for the public to come several times for the same purpose. The staff were trained to get attuned to the time-bound system. But when he was transferred, the system relapsed into its original method.

Jairaj cites frequent transfers of senior administrators as one of the chief reasons for the system to revert to status quo.

While constraints of deteriorating political values, political interference and collusion between politicians and bureaucrats are at the heart of the problem, one cannot wait till the ills of the political system are resolved and there is much that can be done to improve accountability by strengthening people's participation in governance, according to Dr Samuel Paul, chairman, Public Affairs Centre.

The foremost strategy for the government is to make its functioning more transparent by making information more accessible to the citizen. But as one participant rued, our administrators have the colonial hangover of "making secrecy the rule and disclosure the exception".



The outbreak of plague gave rise to heated discussions over the need to make public service agents more responsible

The issue of corruption in public services looms large while addressing the issue of accountability. It was recognised that even law-abiding citizens are often forced to part with speed money since there is no effective alternative available to those who do not wish to break the law or pay bribes. An effective way of dealing with this was forming a tribunal which could accept complaints against those officials demanding bribes, suggested Sriram Panchu, an advocate.

"Laws should also require the service agency to inform the public about the norms and conditions on which services will be delivered," said Dr Paul. This is necessary so that the public can monitor whether the service provided is adequate or deficient.

"There is a world of difference," said Panchu, "between requesting to attend telephones that are out of order, and in mandating that they should be fixed within 48 hours."

While the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments could have been promising measures for decentralising power and strengthening local level accountability, the participants regretted that most of the legislations preferred the status quo. Prof B.K. Chandrashekar of the Indian Institute of Management provided a sample of the administrative apathy when he said that 13 state legislatures had taken away powers from local bodies and vested them in the executive. Citizens' representation on ward com-

mittees and public hearings should be a mandatory feature of governance.

On what citizens themselves can do to enhance accountability, it was felt that NGOs, academia and media should "jump start" and get the citizens, (read the middle class), shake off their inertia. "The middle class have to bring society from a feudal to a democratic form," stressed Ela Bhatt, general secretary, SEWA.

A better organisation of citizens can help in the campaign against deficient services, play advocacy roles in and outside government, seek reforms through negotiations and get these issues on to legislative and electoral agenda.

Also, citizens' groups should build alliances with other groups and professionals like journalists, lawyers, industrialists, suggested Salil Shetty of Action Aid. Academicians can analyse policies and audit reports, make cost-benefit analyses, work out alternatives, evaluate performance of service providers and make this data available to citizens' groups; lawyers can initiate litigation and industrialists can support media campaigns.

Citizens' groups, it was recommended, should take up constructive activity on a pressing demand to build up credibility. They should stay focussed on particular issues and not attempt "everything under the sun". They should use innovative ways of protest. A group called Public in Calcut-

ta organised a protest march at night with members walking with lanterns in the hand to draw attention to the frequent power failures in Calcutta. Citizens need to have a voice, but only one.

Direct collaboration between citizens and government is the next means of enhancing accountability. People's participation in the "planning, design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation" of public service, wherever feasible needs to be formalised, said Dr Paul. When a public housing agency seeks inputs from the target group on the designs facilities and financing of the houses, it is likely that there will be better customer satisfaction. People have also come to believe that government should do everything for them and governments should never ask citizens to take on responsibilities.

A starting point could be citizens' monitoring of such services as street cleaning and garbage clearance. In more complex cases, NGOs with expert inputs can monitor municipal budgets, action plans for roads, transport etc.

User surveys can be conducted to judge customer satisfaction by asking people to evaluate the quality, adequacy and other aspects of services and the feedback used for judging the performance of the agencies involved. The results of such public feedback could be used as a conditionality for allocation of funds to the agency, especially when monopoly conditions prevail. Such "report

cards" can be prepared by government as well as NGOs to ensure better service from the public service agencies.

While litigation and negotiation constitute the stick which citizens can wield to get better services, not much attention has been given to the carrot aspect of recognising and rewarding superior performance and innovation. David Arnold of the Ford Foundation, New Delhi, outlined a new programme of nation-wide awards in the US for exemplary programmes. A committee comprising leaders from government, business, journalism and academia selects the award-winning programmes. The awards and grants are given to the agency responsible as a way of recognising team effort. Winning innovations are well-documented, publicised and used as training material.

Arnold felt two such awards should be instituted in India — one for urban innovation and the other for model panchayats. Some states, like West Bengal, have already instituted awards for panchayats. They should rather reward especially creative local self-help initiatives in solving local problems, mobilisation of local resources for development, citizens' participation and improvements in women's and children's health, education and welfare.

The workshop felt that those innovations should be rewarded which are replicable and sustainable. Citizens' feedback itself could be used as a means for selecting awards.