Keeping an eye on accountability

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

In the aftermath of the plague in Surat, ensuring accountability in public services and people's role in demands raised concerns. Existing bodies like the office of the comptroller and auditor general (CAG) review or reviews of budgets by standing committees of legislatures have themselves to an evaluation of micro-level issues and public expenditure, but they rarely concern themselves with evaluating how effectively the agency provided the service at the micro-level.

In recent times, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has provided a limited means to the public to make redressal for deficient services, but it does not cover services such as road maintenance or garbage disposal for which no direct payment has been incurred. Moreover, initiatives do not help in bringing about systematic reforms for improving accountability. What can governments and the people do to improve accountability, and how can governments and citizens work together to improve accountability? 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 explained by the ex-employee of a public service agency during his tenure as the deputy comptroller of accounts. He found that citizens visited the district office seeking small favours — like getting a ration card, a licence, a caste certificate, etc. To get these, they had to run around to the various offices, provide application forms, and pay fees. The output was not always satisfactory, and the service rendered was often not a function of the service sought. What do you do when you do not get what you want? The applicant would then have to go to the managing director to get an acknowledgement that he had come to a place to seek a service. The system completely deflected the public from seeking the service. The public was asked to come several times for the same purpose. The staff were trained to get attenders to the time-bound system. But when he was transferred, the system relapsed into its original manner.

Narayani cited frequent transfers of senior administrators as one of the chief reasons for the system to revert to status quo. While discussing the question of disintegrating political values, political parties, and bureaucracy are at the heart of the problem. The system is run by a person, and the ill of the political system is evident in the fact that it is run by a person who is not interested in improving it. That is what can be done to improve accountability, and how can we work with people's participation in government, according to Dr Suresh Kumar, director of the Public Affairs Centre.

The current strategy for the government is to make its functioning more transparent by making it understandable, more accessible to the citizen. But as citizens, the public administrators have the potential to change the public service administration's role and disclosure of the exception.

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

The issue of corruption in public services looms large and has been forced to part with speed money since there is no effective alternative available for 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 and accepting bribes, said P. Shanker, an advocate.

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

"There is a world of difference," said Shanker. "Between receiving an official's attention and a simple telephone call that is out of order, and in mandating that they should be fixed within 45 hours.

While the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments could have brought measures for decentralizing power and strengthening local accountability, the government has ignored that most of the legislation favored the status quo: Prof. K.B. Chandrasekhar of the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, provided a sample of the administrative apathy when he said that Deloitte, the administrative agencies, has taken away powers from local bodies and overstepped them in the exorbitant, excessive, and unreasonable representation on ward committees 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 "jumpstart" and get the citizens, read the middle class, school in their inertia. "The middle class have to bring society from a bureaucratic 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 their issues to legislative and electoral agenda.

Also, citizens' groups should build alliances with other groups and professionals like journalists, lawyers, industrialists, and social activists to analyse policies and audit reports, make cost-benefit analysis, work out alternatives, evaluate performance of service providers and make the data available to citizens' groups; lawyers can initiate litigation and assist in legal and media campaigns.

Citizens' groups, it was recommended, should take up constructive activity on a pressing demand to build up credibility. They should stay focused on relevant issues and not attempt "everything under the sun" and should use innovative ways of protest. A group called Public in Calculas organised a protest march at night with members walking in the dark to draw attention to the frequent power failures in Colaba. Citizens need to have a voice, but only one.

Direct collaboration between citizens and government in the next means of enhancing accountability. People's participation in the 'planning, design, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation' of public service, wherever feasible, is to be formalised, they said. Dr Paul. When a public housing agency seeks inputs from the large group on the design, 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 collection. In more complex cases, NGOs with expert inputs can monitor municipal budgets, action plans for roads, and transport etc.

User surveys can be conducted to judge customer satisfaction by asking people to evaluate the quality, acceptability, and other aspects of services and feedback for the feedback for the feedback received, the performance of the agency involved. The results of such public feedback can be used not as a conditionality for allocation of funds to the agency, especially when monitory condition prevails. 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 respecting governments' performance and improving them. David Arnold of the Ford Foundation, New Delhi, outlined a new programme of initiatives to increase public service accountability in the US for exemplary programmes. A committee consisting of leaders from government, business, journalism, and academia selects the award-winning programmes. The awards and grants are given to the agency responsible for a way of recognising team effort. Winning innovations are well-documented and used as training material.

Arnold felt that such awards should be established in India — one for urban innovation and the other for rural innovations. 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, mobilising local resources, developing, and improving in women's and children's health, education, and welfare.

The workshop held the need to emphasise the need for citizens' participation and involvement in the processes of making public services accountable.