To most of us, an ‘open polity’ is an oxymoron, going by the all too common experiences of how our elected political leaders skilfully dodge all attempts to own up for their commitments and actions. At a time when obfuscation and denial are trusted political weapons to thwart any pointed discussion on political accountability, our recent experiences in Delhi give reason for hope and optimism.

In an unprecedented move, a Chief Minister of a state in India openly called for a “social audit” of her government and then went public with the findings. By taking this brave and pioneering step, Mrs. Sheila Dixit has set an example to her peers on the need to be transparent and open. For most of our seasoned politicians, the test and essence of democracy begin and end with elections. This single minded infatuation with elections is so deeply entrenched that today elections have become an end in itself. And any reference to timely and organized public feedback is limited to the act of voting—a five year ritual which seemingly cleanses the polity of all that is wrong and brings into being a new set of actors, ideologues and rhetoric.

Query any citizen on what he or she means by democracy and you get a response (however, cliched it may sound) that it is “what happens between elections”. Far removed from the din of hustings and academic outpourings, the true test of democracy is how effectively a government functions. And for some political leaders at the helm of affairs, the answer often comes too late—when they find themselves unceremoniously voted out of power.

Therefore, in a country where development and deprivation are comfortable bed-fellows, a timely answer to the question of effective governance is not just a matter of enlightened thinking, but also a need for sheer political survival. It is for these reasons that we believe that our social audit on public services in Delhi (p.2) will have a loud and deep resonance in the debates on political accountability in India. Not just for the interesting findings that the report narrates. But also for the manner in which Mrs. Sheila Dixit has responded to the challenge thrown by this very critical public feedback exercise. Far from being defensive and playing down the findings or selectively using them for scoring political brownies, the Chief Minister has used this opportunity to start a process of intense introspection and review within her state and government and set in process a momentum for reforms and improvements. The honesty with which she reviewed and responded to the findings in presence of her senior team leaders was remarkable and inspiring. For many of us who religiously participate in all national and global forums on improving governance and accountability, this experience gives us a chance to counter that all-too-familiar collective and concluding sigh—“if only there is a political will”!

Gopakumar Thampi

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RESEARCH

Chief Minister Mrs. Sheila Dikshit Releases the Findings from the Social Audit of Public Services in Delhi

The Chief Minister of Delhi, Mrs. Sheila Dikshit released a pioneering report on an independent Social Audit of major public services provided by the government of Delhi on September 4, 2006 at a well-attended media event. This is the first time that a Chief Minister of a state in India has placed an independent assessment of the government in the public domain. This independent Social Audit was carried out by the Public Affairs Foundation, a sister organization of the Bangalore-based Public Affairs Centre – nationally and globally known for pioneering the use of Citizen Report Cards.

The Social Audit covered 14165 respondents in Delhi and elicited focused feedback on users' experiences across nine public services viz.

- Provision of Drinking Water through water tankers
- In-Patient services provided by public hospitals run by MCD & State Government (IPD)
- Out Patient services provided by public hospitals run by MCD & State Government (OPD)
- Public bus transport services provided by the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC)
- School education provided by MCD Primary Schools, Government Primary Schools, Sarvodaya Primary Schools and Government Secondary Schools
- Services provided by Fair Price Shops and Kerosene Depots (PDS)
- Services provided by the Motor Licensing Offices (MLO)
- Services provided by the Sub Divisional Magistrate's Offices (Certificates)
- Services provided by the Sub Registrar's Offices (Registration)

This social audit has enabled Delhi's citizens, especially the disadvantaged to provide systematic feedback on these essential services to the government of National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi. The audit also provides a good diagnosis of the critical problems with public services. Citizens have rated the services in terms of access, reliability, transparency & responsiveness. The pointers and insights from this Social Audit has clearly set an agenda for a process of reviews, process reengineering and reforms by the government of NCT.

BROAD POINTERS & IMPLICATIONS

- Citizens' satisfaction varies widely across services. Overall satisfaction with services shows a mixed trend (Chart 1) with out patient services and school education coming out better, while services provided by fair price shops and kerosene depots, registration services and drinking water services provided by tankers need urgent improvements. There is however, much scope for improvement even in the better performing services.

Chart 1: Overall Satisfaction with Services
(Percentage of respondents fully satisfied)

Note: Percentage of partially dissatisfied respondents are not illustrated here

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health: Outpatient</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDS</td>
<td>38%</td>
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Legends: MLO = Motor Vehicle Licensing Office; DTC = Delhi Transport Corporation; PDS = Public Distribution System

July - December 2006
A major finding of the audit is that government has extended access to most services, but has not been able to fully deliver on the quality and reliability of services.

Clear evidence of service improvements: This Social Audit clearly highlights that some services have improved more than others over the past two years (see Chart 3). However, it's a matter of concern that progress is slow for services that matter most for the poor like drinking water services and services of fair price shops and kerosene. Also, wherever improvement over time is high, public satisfaction is also high.

Chart 3: Improvements in Services over the Last 2 Years
(Percentage of respondents)

- Improved targeting of pro-poor services. Feedback on both qualitative and quantitative indicators show that pro-poor services like provision of drinking water in slums, provision of food-grain and kerosene are better targeted towards the poorer sections of society. A higher proportion of poor households have reported in the affirmative on indicators related to access, usage, quality and reliability.

- Spatial variability within a service is a matter of concern: A disconcerting pointer from this study is the wide variations across geographical locations in Delhi on different aspects of service delivery. This means that in addition to service quality issues, equity in service delivery is also a matter of major concern. Spatial variability is observed to be high for water tanker services; registration services, while MLO services show least variations.

- Need for comprehensive reforms. User feedback on interfaces with agencies point to the limitations of reforms that aim to tackle front end changes. While increasing adaptations of technology in operations have clearly streamlined processes, the continuing existence of middlemen and weak monitoring of actual delivery show, that more systemic changes are needed to make service delivery more transparent, reliable and responsive to people.

- Low awareness of service standards. Though Citizen Charters have been created for most services, knowledge about the same is quite limited. However, on the positive side wherever users are aware of Citizen Charters, they recognize their value and find the content useful.

- Limited problem solving capacity. The Social Audit also highlights the fact that there are very few instances of effective grievance redress whenever users complained about a problem. Also, the study underscores the fact that very few users who faced a problem actually lodged formal complaints, perhaps indicating low faith in formal grievance redress mechanisms.

The Way Forward
Speaking to the press at the report release function, the Chief Minister announced that a high level steering group, headed by the Chief Secretary, Government of NCT Delhi has been set up, to implement specific reform measures to address the gaps pointed out in the social audit. A series of intensive and detailed discussions are planned with individual agencies to prioritize areas for reforms and to create a consensus on reform strategies and measures. The Chief Minister has specifically called upon Public Affairs Foundation to assist in this process. Reiterating the value of the social audit as a very critical public feedback exercise, the Chief Minister announced that progress of the reform measures will be monitored periodically and the social audit will be repeated to review the initial benchmarks.

For further information, contact: pafindia@vsnl.net
The Right to Information in India - Part I: The Law

(This is the first in a series of three articles on the Indian Right to Information Act, 2005. The remaining parts which will focus on the 'implementation' and 'utilization' aspects of the Act will appear in the subsequent issues of Public Eye)

Introduction

Since 1990s, there has been an almost unstoppable trend towards the recognition of the right to information as a fundamental human right by civil society, intergovernmental organisations1 and countries2 around the world. The right to information has the potential to serve as a powerful tool for democracy, good governance and the protection of other human rights, including but not limited to freedom of expression, right to food, right to education and right to health.

The genesis of the right to information movement in India can be traced to the grassroots organisation Mazdoor Kissan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan which started a successful campaign for right to information in the 1990s. With the help of government data, MKSS showed how public officials skimmed money from the wages of labourers of public infrastructure and development projects, and denied food aid to the poorest of the poor. This pioneering work by MKSS resulted in the National Campaign for People’s Right to Information – a collective of several organisations and individuals from politics, media, and social activism, which became the frontline force advocating for a national right to information law. After years of struggle for a national right to information regime, the Indian Right to Information Act (Act No. 22 of 2005) was passed in May 2005 and came into force on 12 October 2005. The Right to Information Act provides for a procedural right to information. It entitles citizens to seek information which is held by or under the control of public authorities. The Right Information Act puts public authorities under the corresponding obligation to meet information requests of the citizens, unless previously defined exceptions apply, and furthermore obliges public authorities to proactively provide certain key information, even in the absence of a request.

A precondition for the utilisation of the right to information for these purposes is the enactment of a detailed procedural right to information law, which is in line with international standards and inspired by the principle of maximum disclosure of information, coupled with effective implementation and enforcement. With this in mind, the first part of this article attempts a study evaluation of the Indian Right to Information Act of 2005.

The legal regime of right to information

The first precondition for the protection of the right to information is a formal and enforceable legal right to information regime. This legal regime can consist of constitutional provisions and/or specific procedural laws.

- Constitutional provisions

Some countries provide for the right to information in their constitution, usually by means of a broad provision guaranteeing the right of access to information. In other countries only
the constitutional right to freedom of expression is specified and the right to information is inferred from this constitutional right.

Constitutional provisions can be effective where a legal enforcement system is in place, which is capable of giving effect to constitutional law. In many countries this is not the case and thus, a constitutional provision will have little or no relevance.

- **Procedural right to information law**

It is generally accepted that the most effective way of guaranteeing the right to information is to pass a specific law protecting such a right, and establishing administrative and legal procedures to ensure its implementation and enforcement. In order to be effective, this procedural right to information regime must meet the following key criteria:

- **Broad in scope:** The right to information law should cover information about the work of all public bodies on national and regional level and private bodies offering public services.
- **Maximum disclosure:** The principle of maximum disclosure of information encapsulates the basic rationale underlying freedom of information legislation – the presumption being that information belongs to the citizens and is not owned by the state.
- **Limited exemptions for withholding information:** All right to information laws include a number of exemptions to protect important public and national interests. However, if exemptions are too broad, they can undermine the purpose of the right to information legislation. Therefore, exemptions must be clearly and narrowly defined and subject to strict “harm” and “public interest” tests. For example, it is not legitimate to exclude all information relating to national security or individual’s privacy, but only information that would actually harm national security or personality rights should be covered (“harm test”). In addition, exemptions should be subject to a public interest override. This approach provides for the release of information, even if it falls within the scope of an exception, in case where the overall public interest is served by disclosure, for example where the benefits of disclosure outweigh the harm (“public interest test”).

- **Efficient record management:** The law must require public authorities to create and maintain record management systems that meet the public need for information.
- **Obligation to publish certain key information:** Public authorities must be obliged to proactively publish and widely disseminate information of significant public interest, such as how public authorities function and the content of decisions or policies affecting the citizens.
- **Clearly defined application process:** The law must contain definitions of reasonable fees, a reasonable time limit for administrative response, penalties, and an effective, efficient, independent appeals and complaints mechanism in the event of an information request being denied.
- **Independent monitoring, appeals and complaints agency:** The law must provide for an independent monitoring and appeals body in order to ensure the implementation and enforcement of the right to information. This could be an existing ombudsman or human rights body or one established for this purpose, such as an Information Commission.
- **Protection of whistleblowers:** Public officials who release information on the wrongdoing of public institutions should be protected from any legal, administrative or employment related sanctions.
- **Publicity and training:** The law must contain provisions obligating the government to actively undertake training for officials and educate citizens about the right to access information and the related application and appeals procedure.
- **Allocation of funds:** The law should specify an allocation of funds for the purpose of implementing the right to information.
Evaluation of the Indian Right to Information Act of 2005

The Indian Right to Information Act of 2005 (RTI Act) can be qualified as a specific procedural law, which has many of the key elements outlined above:

- **Broad in scope:** The RTI Act covers all information held by “public authorities”, which includes a wide spectrum of bodies and officials from the central government, state governments, panchayati raj institutions, local bodies and, significantly, all bodies, including non-governmental organisations, that are established, constituted, owned, controlled or substantially financed by the government. In addition, Section 2 (f) includes information relating to a private body which can be accessed by a public authority. This provision brings private bodies within the purview of the law and constitutes an interesting variation on requiring disclosure by private bodies. Section 2(f) of the RTI Act has been designed to keep the onus on the government to collect information from private bodies, rather than requiring the citizens to chase private bodies themselves.

- **The principle of maximum disclosure** is reflected in the broad definition of information in Section 2 (f) RTI Act, which covers any material in any form and in the guarantee of a right to information in Section 3 of the RTI Act.

- **Limited exceptions for withholding information:** In Section 8 (1) and 9 the RTI Act list specific cases where information can be legitimately denied to citizens. These standard exemptions are not absolute and public authorities may allow access to information even if it is exempted if “public interest in disclosure outweighs the harm to the protected interest”. This is known as public interest test and applied to all categories of exempt information. However, the Right to Information Act does not provide for a harm test.

- **Obligation to publish certain key information:** Section 4 of the RTI Act obliges all public authorities to routinely and proactively publish and update a wide range of information, including information on structure, function, financial details, and schemes related to an organisation, in addition to details of consultative arrangements and information access. This information must be disseminated widely and in a form that is easily accessible and comprehensible to the public, such as local language announcements through the media or the Internet.

- **Efficient record management:** According to Section 4 (1) (a) of the RTI Act, put authorities are obliged to maintain all their records catalogued and indexed in a manner and form that facilitates the right to information. Authorities must also ensure that all records are computerised and connected through a network to facilitate access to this information.

- **Clearly defined application process:** Section 6 and 7 of the RTI Act provide for a detailed definition of the application process. Applicants have the right to request information in writing or through electronic means from the Central Public Information Officer or the Central Assistant Public Information Officer. The RTI Act prescribes that the Public Information Officer can charge a reasonable fee for supplying the information, but clarifies that there is no charge for applicants who live below the poverty line. It provides for a time limit of 30 days and in a novel approach, this time limit is reduced to 48 hours where the information sought “concerns the life and liberty of a person”. Although the law does not provide for criminal liability as a penalty, it has put in place a stringent system of penalties in case the Public Information Officer fails to provide the requested information or fails to issue the rejection order within the specified time. The

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5 Section 4 (1) (b) Indian Right to Information Act 2005.
6 Section 4 (2) Indian Right to Information Act 2005.
7 Section 4 (1) (b) Indian Right to Information Act 2005 lists 17 categories of information.
8 Section 4 (4) Indian Right to Information Act 2005.
Information Commission can ask the public authority that has denied information to compensate the applicant for any loss incurred. The Information Commission can also recommend departmental disciplinary action against a Public Information Officer for intentionally obstructing the furnishing of information, denying of destroying information or providing misleading information.

- **Independent monitoring, appeals and complaints agency:** The Act provides for the establishment of an independent Central Information Commission as well as independent State Information Commissions. These Commissions are given broad powers to hear appeals and are also obliged to monitor the law regularly, including production of annual reports. In addition, Information Commissions can issue any order necessary to ensure compliance with the law, including ordering the release of documents, appointment of Public Information Officers and publication of specified information.

- **Publicity and training:** Section 26 (1) of the RTI Act obliges the government to educate the public and, in particular, disadvantaged communities on how to exercise the right to information and to provide training on the right to information to public authorities.

However, despite the coverage of most of the outlined key elements, the RTI Act faces a few shortcomings, which could be abused to deny information.

The RTI Act, by including the States in its purview, has promoted questions on the nature of the relationship between the new national RTI law and the State RTI laws, as well as the jurisdictional and operational interaction between the Central Information Commission and the State Information Commissions. In addition, the RTI Act does not specify how much money has been allocated to setup the mechanisms that the legislation requires and does not include a detailed independent procedure for the selection of Information Commission staff. The RTI Act does also not provide for a whistleblower protection provision.

In conclusion, the RTI Act, if improved, implemented, enforced and utilised effectively offers a tool for good governance, democracy and human rights protection in India.

Sabine Benzing - Balzer  
Project Co-ordinator  
Right to Information Empowerment Programme

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**Launch of Citizen Report Card e-learning toolkit at Asian Development Bank, Manila on 13 July 2006**

Public Affairs Centre (PAC), with funding from Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Asian Development Bank Institute, designed and developed an e-learning toolkit version of the Citizen Report Card (CRC), the objective being to promote its use as the CRC approach has been acknowledged as an international best practice to improve quality of public services. This self-learning tool kit contains practical information and exercises to enable users develop the basic knowledge and skills to successfully plan and implement Citizen Report Cards (CRCs), with minimal support from PAC.

On 13 July, 2006, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Asian Development Bank Institute launched the CRC e-learning toolkit along with another toolkit called Continuous Improvement and Benchmarking (CIB) Techniques developed by the Australian Continuous Improvement Group in Melbourne, Australia.

Attending the launch at ADB's Manila Headquarters were about 60 representatives from service providers, academicians, training institutions, and development agencies, among others and the launch was presided over by Mr. Bindu Lohani, Director General of ADB's Regional and Sustainable Development Department. While Dr. Samuel Paul, Chairman PAC gave the keynote address, Dr. Sita Sekhar, Chief Research Officer made a presentation of CRC to the distinguished participants. Other speakers included Dr. Alex Brillantes and Dr. Victoria who had assessed the CIB and CRC toolkits respectively.


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1 Another e-learning tool ‘Learning Tool on Citizen Report Card on Drinking Water and Sanitation Services’ prepared by PAC for World Bank can be accessed at [www.walsan-crc.org](http://www.walsan-crc.org)
WORKSHOPS

Capacity Building of Civil Society Organization in Hubli and Dharwad

The Hubli Dharwad Municipal Corporation (HDMC) invited Public Affairs Centre (PAC) to conduct a capacity building workshop on Good Governance for civil society organizations in the twin cities Hubli and Dharwad. The workshop, held during September 24-25, 2006, was attended by people from all walks of life such as doctors, engineers, professors, lecturers, lawyers, industrialists, businessmen, and the religious most of whom were senior citizens representing several non-governmental organizations.

A mix of lectures, presentations, participative and interactive sessions, video films, group analysis etc., was freely used. Participants were also provided with a Resource kit which contained useful information on governance issues. Key themes discussed during the workshop included Right to Information; Awareness on election campaigns and importance of voting; Information on public services and how to improve them; Role of civil society in improving governance; and Information on rights and duties of citizens.

The workshop facilitated an enabling opportunity for learning new concepts and practices and also, to share experiences and vision. A major outcome of the workshop was the design of an action plan detailing out key improvements required to improve infrastructure provision in Hubli and Dharwad.

Open House Programme on “Citizens’ Fight Against Corruption”

Public Affairs Centre (PAC), the lead partner among five NGOs that are part of ‘Coalition Against Corruption’ (CAC) in Bangalore, organized an Open House meeting on August 3, 2006 to felicitate three citizens who fought corruption with the help of CAC and the Right to Information (RTI). The Open House was an effort to sensitize the larger public to the need for collective action in fighting corruption and also, to show case successful cases facilitated by CAC.

Three successful case studies were presented. The first one, presented by Mr. Sunil Mor pertaining to obtaining a khata (property ownership document). Mr. Mor contacted CAC in December 2005 since his attempts to obtain his khata without the payment of bribe had not yielded results, despite several visits to his City Municipal Council (CMC). He was determined to fight rather than yield. CAC’s intervention helped him to obtain the khata in a few days, without paying a bribe. This was, in fact, the first success story of the CAC campaign.

The second case is a unique example of how an individual’s efforts can benefit the society at large and also result in a systemic change. Mr. Muralidhar Rao questioned the validity of notices served to hundreds of apartment owners asking them to pay arrears of Stamp Duty on their properties, registered over a year ago. With help of CAC, he approached the Secretary of the Revenue department who took immediate action. The concerned District Registrar was suspended and Mr. Rao was directed to advise all the affected parties to refrain from taking action on the notices. The Department has also taken steps to ensure that finality is given registrations made on the basis of notified guidance values. Mr. Muralidhar had resisted the temptation to yield to deals that lawyers were negotiating with the Sub Registrar’s office. It is understood that several apartment owners already made the deal payments after negotiation to reduce the amount.

Mr Venkatram of “Supraba” - an association in Basavanagudi, was keen to obtain details regarding the road asphaltting works in his Ward and obtained the same under Right to Information. To his shock, he came to know that payments had been made to a contractor for a Road that had not been asphalted at all! After unearthing the scam, which was reported in major dailies, he has registered a case
with the Lokayukta (Ombudsman); the report is awaited.

The Coalition Against Corruption gave mementoes to all three citizens on the occasion as a token of appreciation.

CAC was launched six months ago to help citizens fight corruption. With the help line 5773 4444, CAC is available to the public from Monday to Friday, between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. Citizens who are not able to access public services because of demands for illegal gratification can contact CAC for help. All complainants must have made genuine attempts first to obtain the services through notified procedures before approaching CAC. A specific format for complaints is also available. For more information on CAC, visit the Public Affairs Centre website: www.pacindia.org CAC's email id is: cacblr@gmail.com

CMCA BRINGS “CHAKACHAK” TO BANGALORE!

Jhaadu baba to the rescue

CMCA screened two premier shows of Sai Paranjpye’s film – “Chakachak”. More than 1500 CMCA civic club members viewed this environmental film, about a group of children who become disillusioned with the dirt and corruption around them and decide to do something rather than just crib and complain. Together, they form the CHAKACHAK Club and with the help of Jhadoob Baba, clean up their neighbourhood and spread civic awareness to their families and neighbours. The energetic and enthusiastic audience thoroughly enjoyed the film, which was fun, inspiring, motivating and very thought provoking.

WIDE ANGLE

THE 2006 COMMITMENT TO DEVELOPMENT INDEX

2005 was dubbed the “Year of Development.” Challenged by a sense of urgency underscored in the review of Millennium Development Goals which pointed to an immediate increase in aid to end global poverty, leaders of the world’s richest nations made impassioned pleas to help the poor at various global meetings. But are the world’s richest countries actually walking the talk? Each year the Center for Global Development and FOREIGN POLICY look past the rhetoric to measure how rich-country governments are helping or hurting poor countries. The 2006 Commitment to Development Index ranks 21 rich nations by assessing their policies and practices across seven areas of government action: foreign aid, trade, investment, migration, environment, security, and technology.

This year, the Netherlands beat Denmark to take the No. 1 ranking in the index; incidentally, Denmark which historically is seen to be one of the best performers recorded the largest overall drop. One country that made strides this year is Japan, which has finished dead last every year since the index was launched in 2003. It reportedly put an end to a long-held practice of lobbying poor-country governments against enforcing labor, human rights, and environmental standards for Japanese-owned factories. The United States improved its score, due in part to falling farm subsidies and rising foreign aid. Spain posted the most spectacular gains, thanks to a migration policy that makes it easier for immigrants to enter and work legally.

For the 21 rich countries as a whole, the overall trend continues to be one of little change. The
average score for all the index countries climbed modestly from 5.0 in 2003 to 5.3 in 2005, then fell slightly to 5.2 this year. Still, twice as many countries have seen their score improve as have seen their score decline in the past four years. That's an encouraging trend, because development is about more than just giving money; it's about the rich and powerful taking responsibility for policies that affect the poor and powerless.

However, the most telling finding from the report is that a “commitment to democracy at home means a greater commitment to development abroad”. When the data from the Index is juxtaposed alongside the World Bank’s Voice and Accountability Indices (a mathematical synthesis of expert judgments gathered by groups including Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit, which measures elements of democracy such as free and fair elections and how much the government represses dissent), it is clear that the more accountable a government is to its own people, the more it does for those to whom it is not accountable. The Netherlands, for instance, not only gives aid generously, but is reducing its greenhouse emissions, has put in place policies that support investment in developing countries, and actively contributes to peacekeeping operations around the globe. At the opposite extreme, Japan, which has the second-least accountable government after Greece, has a small aid program and high barriers to workers and agricultural imports from poor countries. This pattern likely stems from the fact that in wealthy democracies with less accountable governments, special interests hold more sway. They divert government spending away from foreign aid, force aid to be “tied” to spending on donor-country companies, and promote self-interested trade barriers. Development may take place abroad, but the index shows that it often begins at home.

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(Details of the 2006 CGD/FP Commitment to Development Index can be found in “The Commitment to Development Index: 2006 Edition,” by David Roodman, available at www.cgdev.org.)
More than 160 water and sanitation specialists from 16 African countries participated in the East African Regional Conference on ‘Accelerating Water Supply and Sanitation for the Urban Poor,’ hosted in Nairobi, Kenya, from 29–30 May, 2006. The conference was convened by the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, with joint support from the German Agency for Technical Co-operation, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), and the Water and Sanitation Program-Africa (WSP-AF).

The regional dialogue brought together senior managers of the water sector from national and local governments, regulatory agencies, utilities and private domestic water service providers, as well as civil society, think tanks and the local media. Also present were multilateral and bilateral donor agencies and international development organizations.

The conference was called to focus attention and stimulate action on how to resolve critical water supply, water safety and sanitation access issues for the majority of urban poor in Africa. With less than ten years left to attain the Millennium Development Goals on water supply and sanitation – to halve the proportion of people without access to basic water and sanitation services by 2015 – Sub-Saharan Africa is still the region most off-track with respect to achieving these global targets. The most vulnerable are poor communities, especially women and children living in Africa’s fast growing suburbia of low-income settlements. The dialogue therefore focused on searching for solutions to step up and sustain the pace at which the urban poor can gain access to improved water and sanitation services.

Discussions focused on practical solutions to improve delivery of water supply and sanitation services to the poor. These include pro-poor reform of sector policies; harnessing the potential of local private sector partnerships; data availability and sector information management; and listening to the voices of the urban poor. The managers of key WSS institutions across east, central and southern Africa called for political commitment from governments, and urged good corporate governance and institutional leadership to accelerate access to services for the urban poor. They also identified the need to strengthen the capacities of regulators to implement pro-poor regulation measures, and the challenge of enabling local small-scale water and sanitation service providers to operate in low-income settlements.

Key recommendations included stronger pro-poor sector reform processes, pro-poor regulation for WSS service provision, improved information and monitoring systems to cover particularly the settlements of the urban poor, public-private partnerships (with active participation of downstream/small-scale providers); improved accountability of the domestic private sector/small-scale providers to consumers; and strengthened consumer voice and engagement. External support agencies were called upon to support these actions through knowledge and financial support.

Dr. Gopakumar Thampi was an invited Keynote Speaker at this event on “Consumer Voice”; the growing application of Citizen Report Card was a major point of discussion on the strategies to strengthen consumer voice in the water sector.
From Rags to Rhapsody... Singing to Raise Awareness on Corruption!

The Golden Pride Childrens Choir is a group of 42 children from a remote village in Tanzania. Their voices have taken them from their village to international acclaim at major music festivals. But what makes this Choir quite remarkable is that the themes the children sing are deeply rooted in their social and political contexts. The titles of the songs in their debut album released in 2003 — Mapambano (The Struggle) — reflects this concern: "To begin the struggle, Education is a child's right. It's true Tanzanians, we have forgotten. Protect your country's reputation."

In 2006, the Golden Pride Childrens Choir recorded their second CD — Live with Pride! In this album, the lyrics are much more political and direct. Here's a sample from a song — "The Fourth Phase Government":

"We must sweep our offices — so they become clean
Our service in our offices must be clean — and fair
We must clean the parastatal organizations so they too become clean,
Sabotage, theft, unethical businesses and bribery — we must bury them
The system of the Courts, Police Force and Prisons — we must clean them,
Business licenses and income sources (of Government and people) — must be respected,
Registration of all political parties must be free and transparent,
Hospital and educational services must be improved
The iron broom has to clean everywhere — so that it (the Country) becomes clean"

The Choir has performed in many reputed international music events — the 2004 WOMAD festival of World Music in the UK, the 2006 Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival in Melbourne and the Stimmen Festival in Germany. Funds raised on their tours go towards building a much needed secondary school in their village, the construction of which started in April 2006.

More information on the Golden Pride Childrens Choir can be accessed from http://www.goldenpridechoir.org/

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