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# India's Citizen's Charters: In Search of a Champion

SAMUEL PAUL

This paper presents an assessment of the progress and effectiveness over the past decade of the citizen's charter initiative that is an effort to make public service providers more open, citizen-friendly and accountable. This reform has failed to deliver on its promise. Though the underlying model has much relevance to the Indian context, the lack of a sound strategy and the absence of champions at the central and state levels to see it through have contributed significantly to this outcome.

A customer is the most important visitor to our premises. He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption in our work. He is the purpose of it.

– Mahatma Gandhi

In view of the quasi-judicial work done by the police department, it will neither be possible, nor desirable to introduce a regular and direct social monitoring, unlike in the case of some other service departments. ...there is no question of any monitoring by any person or agency (including by society at large), which has not been authorised to do so by a specific law or statute.

– Kerala Police Charter (web site)

**Y**our taxes are working for you" was the bold headline of a huge advertisement by the government of India that has appeared in major newspapers across India. It went on to list the amounts allocated to various priority sectors and programmes, the total of which added up to Rs 2,21,000 crore. Earlier advertisements used to merely highlight the large amounts being spent on important national programmes and projects. But it was for the first time that the government claimed that its revenues were actually working for the benefit of the citizens.

Gigantic allocations of public funds for their cherished causes gladden the hearts of all planners, political leaders, and activists. But how could they or, for that matter, ordinary citizens, be sure that the funds are being productively deployed and indeed benefit the people for whom they are meant? Most public officials will respond that their departments and agencies that disburse the funds have the necessary rules, regulations and systems to ensure that the moneys are spent for the stated purposes. Most citizens, on the other hand, would plead ignorance of how the funds flow operates and claim that they have scant information on what to expect by way of services and entitlements. It is this asymmetry of information and people's

unhappy experiences in their dealing with governments that make them wonder whether the spending agencies adhere to their own rules and guidelines and make the taxes work for the people. Policymakers and scholars alike often brand this phenomenon as an implementation problem, something that has to be sorted out at lower levels. After all, the big job of mobilising resources and allocating them efficiently have been competently done by those in charge, and given due publicity.

## 1 Citizen's Charter Launch

In 1997, the government of India (GOI) launched an important reform initiative to tackle the problem of information asymmetry and the perennial disconnect between the allocation and effectiveness of public expenditure referred to above. After due consultations with the state governments, the GOI announced that all central and state ministries and departments would prepare "citizen's charters" in order to inform the public about their rights in terms of public services, the standards of the services, and the remedies available in case of failure [GOI 2003]. These charters were to be widely disseminated so that citizens are well informed of their rights and entitlements. Guidelines for their design, use and dissemination were provided to all ministries, departments, and agencies of the central and state governments by GOI's department of administrative reforms and public grievances (DAR&PG).

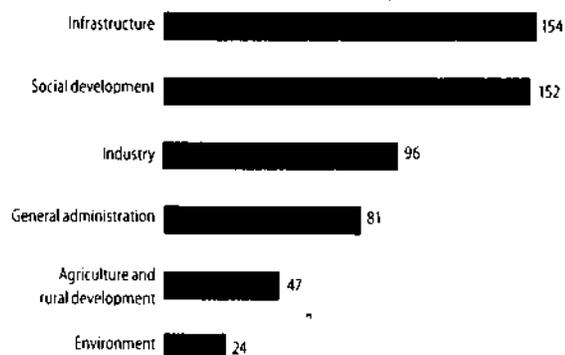
Citizen's charters were introduced for the first time in the UK by former prime minister John Major in the early 1990s. Growing dissatisfaction with public services, the need to transform the country's large, but non-responsive bureaucracy, and the resource crunch facing the government, were key factors that led Major to assign a high priority to this reform [Government of UK 1999]. His citizen's charter initiative had a threefold objective: (1) to ensure that government agencies clearly specify the services and service quality they will provide to the public and the terms on which they will be delivered; (2) to empower citizens with information on services so as to enable them to claim their entitlements; and (3) through this

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process, to make government more transparent and accountable to citizens. In the UK, this reform resulted in the widespread adoption of charters by numerous public agencies. The model has been adopted by

**Figure: Distribution of Citizen's Charters Obtained by Sector**



several other western and Commonwealth countries [OECD 1996]. It was the success of this reform that led GOI to launch a similar reform initiative in 1997.

The significance and potential impact of this reform in India cannot be over-emphasised. For the first time, the GOI had directed all government agencies/departments to make information easily accessible to the citizens on the services and rights they are entitled to, the standards of the services and the remedies in case the services were not delivered. The information was to be provided through web sites and in all public offices. This was to be done "suo motu", without the citizen having to apply for the information, paying a fee, and applying in a given format, as is the case with the Right to Information (RTI) Act. Imagine the impact this reform would have made, if the numerous public agencies with which citizens interact on a daily basis across this vast country, had faithfully implemented their charters. Though this happened well before the RTI Act became law, however, this reform was a low-key affair, almost as if it was a purely internal matter of the government.

### Review of Existing Charters

In this paper, we present the results of a recent review and assessment of the citizen's charters that are in operation in both GOI and the state governments to understand how well they have been designed and implemented in India.<sup>1</sup> The study was carried out as an independent exercise by the Public Affairs Centre (PAC), Bangalore, and

its findings were published in July 2007.<sup>2</sup> Since a decade has passed since the adoption of this reform, it is reasonable to assume that a fair amount of experience has been gathered by the governments involved, based on which further improvements could be made. Since citizen's charters are in the form of a compact between a public agency and citizens, and entail the former's commitments in relation to its services to the people, a systematic review is a credible way to find out how leaders at the bureaucratic and political levels conceptualised and guided this process. Though the government asserts that our taxes are spent on priority programmes and services, if the commitments and information provided to the people through the charters are partial and vague, and are not working for the benefit of the citizen, the claim that "your taxes are working for you" is indeed a questionable one.

### Methodology

The PAC study identified 767 citizen's charters through government web sites and other sources. They covered both GOI departments/ministries, and state and local governments and their agencies. But the process of gathering these documents was by no means easy. In several cases, government agencies did not respond to the request seeking copies of the charters. Some charters displayed on web sites were not complete or were illegible. It is indeed a paradox that citizen's charters that are meant to enhance transparency and ease of

access to ordinary people, were not readily accessible to the research team despite persistent search and correspondence!

The methodology of the study involved a three stage process. To begin with, a preliminary review of all available charters was attempted. Of the 767 charters collected, the PAC team found 554 to be complete and usable for a preliminary review. The purpose of this review was to see whether they contained all the essential elements that a charter is supposed to have. This was followed by a more intensive review of 200 charters to assess the quality and content of the charters. This sample was selected by the team based on the extent of completeness of the documents (as shown by the preliminary review), and the need to have a representation of the states that had a reasonable number of charters. Finally, a sub-sample of 80 charters was selected for an in depth assessment that made use of a field survey of users and officials, and an independent observation of the offices of the selected public agencies/departments. This enabled the research team to move from the design end to the implementation of the charters. Fieldwork was undertaken in eight states that accounted for the vast majority of charters.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Major Findings

The preliminary review of the 554 charters revealed a clear picture of the distribution of charters by region and sector. The table shows that the eastern and north-eastern regions had very few charters. The southern states were clearly in the lead with respect to the number of charters. Similarly, social sectors and infrastructure were the areas with the largest number of charters (see the figure).

**Table: Distribution of Citizen's Charters by Region**

Region	States	Number of Charters Obtained	Number of Charters Reviewed
South	Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu	199	195
Central ministries and agencies		114	61
Western	Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan	84	84
Northern	Delhi, Chhattisgarh, HP, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, J and K, Uttarakhand	84	83
Union territories	Andaman and Nicobar, Chandigarh, Dadra, Daman and Diu, Lakshadweep, Puducherry	6767	
Central commercial organisations		50	50
North-eastern	Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura	99	
Eastern	Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal	55	
Total		561	554

A systematic analysis of the design and content of 200 citizen's charters out of the 554 revealed that their design quality and content left much to be desired. None of the charters, for example, covered all the 10 essential components of a model document.<sup>4</sup> Only a little over half of these charters had spelt out basic service standards and grievance redress mechanisms available to the citizens. Less than one in 20 provided a compensation clause in case of service failure. Even basic contact information was incomplete in half the cases.

It is no surprise then that in the assessment exercise, none of the 200 charters received the grade "very good". Almost 60 per cent were rated as "average" in terms of design quality while 32 per cent were considered "good". Almost a tenth of the charters were rated "poor".<sup>5</sup>

### Field Survey in Brief

The field survey of nearly 1,200 users and 325 officials responsible for the service delivery at different levels provided a ringside view of how this reform represented by 80 charters from eight different states was working across the country. Below is a brief summary of the key findings: (1) The services provided by the agencies/departments with citizen's charters were considered by almost half of all users as average or poor. Only 15 per cent of the users rated the services as "very good" while 37 per cent considered the services to be "good". The adoption of charters did not translate into significantly higher or uniform levels of service quality. (2) Of the users who considered services to be unsatisfactory, only 36 per cent of those who complained confirmed that their problems were resolved. A major reason why users did not complain was because they were unaware of the grievance redress system. (3) Multiple visits to the agencies to complete their work seem to be the common experience of over 40 per cent of the users. The time and energy spent by citizens in accessing services or sorting out their problems was thus considerable. The mere existence of citizen's charters in these agencies did not seem to make any difference to this problem. (4) However, a good majority (76 per cent) of the users found that the procedures for applying for a service were reasonably simple. The conduct of the officials was

rated as helpful by most users even if their problems were not solved. (5) A major failure of the reform is that the awareness of users about charters was abysmally low. Only a quarter of those surveyed knew about citizen's charters. Only about 7 per cent of them had seen and read a charter.

Governments seem to have done precious little to disseminate information about charters among the public. Nor was there any evidence that feedback from users on the charters was being sought by the agencies. (6) Though some components of charters were displayed prominently in a majority of public agencies, service standards were displayed in a mere 14 per cent of the offices visited by the research investigators. Where service standards were stated in the charters, only 40 per cent of the users felt that the services received by them were according to the stated standards.

Another important finding is (7) the display of charters in public places by some public agencies did make a difference to their service quality and responsiveness. It is possible that dissemination of information about charters goes with better preparedness of an agency to provide the service. Disclosure also empowers people with information that can be used to better access public services. A comparative analysis of the user feedback from both agencies that had displayed their charters and those that had not displayed them showed that user satisfaction with services was better in the former agencies (29 per cent) than with the latter (15 per cent). Similarly, users felt that compliance with service standards and staff courtesies were better in the agencies that had displayed the charters than in those that had not displayed their charters. (8) It is common practice in an organisation to review, revise and finetune documents of this type based on the experience gained in the field. Service standards could be made more realistic, and more useful information provided to citizens based on such reviews.

Very few of the charter documents reviewed, however, provided any evidence of revision or updating, though the reform was launched a decade ago. Only 6 per cent mentioned that the document would be updated. (9) Interviews with the officials in the agencies that had citizen's charters showed that their awareness about charters

was also rather low. And these are officials directly concerned with service delivery or supervision. Only a little over half the officials interviewed could recall the contents of their charters. Nearly two-thirds of the officials claimed that they were not trained to implement the charters. Only a third said that they had played a role in the design of the charters.

### Further Insights

A disaggregation of these findings by state and sector offers further insights. It shows, for example, whether some states or sectors have done better than others in the design and implementation of citizen's charters.

As noted earlier, the distribution of charters by state is rather uneven. Just eight states accounted for a lion's share of the charters. (1) Of the 554 charters reviewed by the PAC team, 17 per cent were from Andhra Pradesh and 15 per cent from Tamil Nadu. Union territories or smaller states such as Pondichery, Delhi and Goa also accounted for an impressive number. Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal together accounted for only five charters. (2) In terms of public awareness about charters, Tamil Nadu leads, with nearly two-thirds of the people showing at least some knowledge about the existence of charters. Users of services in Punjab and Haryana were the least aware (4-10 per cent). (3) In Tamil Nadu, a consortium of NGOs had established citizen information centres in all districts that disseminated knowledge about charters among the people. These centres had displayed citizen's charters in an organised manner. It is quite possible that this had helped increase public awareness about charters. In Andhra Pradesh too, there was an involvement of civic groups in the planning of charters, and spreading knowledge about them. (4) A sector-wise analysis shows that while 73 per cent of the users dealing with agencies in the industry sector had expressed satisfaction with their services, only 17 per cent of those who dealt with the social development sector (education, health, etc) gave a similar rating.

A mere third of the users visiting a social sector agency said that the latter complied with service standards, while 60 per cent of the users said the same about agencies in the industry sector. Grievance redress

was also somewhat better in the industry sector agencies than in the social sector agencies. Those who deal with social sector agencies are largely lower income people whereas those who interact with environment and industry sector agencies are the better off sections of the population.

The findings reported above tell us the story of a reform that seem to have lost its way. They raise important questions about how such reforms are conceptualised, launched and monitored. The large funds being allocated by GOI in the name of poverty alleviation and essential public services will not make the desired impact when complementary reforms of this nature remain incomplete and neglected. There are many champions for big budgets, but none for citizen's charters. In order to understand what lies behind this story, one needs to probe deeper into these matters, both through interviews with the key officials who were involved in the reform process from its inception, and a study of the documents available with governments and their agencies. Getting access to these sources is not easy for the simple reason that officials get transferred or retired, and documentation is seldom complete nor readily available. The PAC study did not attempt an investigation of the factors that may have contributed to the outcomes reported. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw a more general set of conclusions based on the study and speculate on their wider implications for policy.

### 3 Conclusions

The following are the main conclusions of the analysis.

**Access to Citizen's Charters:** The findings summarised above are drawn from a nationwide study of the citizen's charter initiative of the GOI. Limited progress reports and assessments of charters are available from different parts of the country. But it is for the first time that an independent review of how this reform is working across the country has been attempted. A striking conclusion of this exercise is that getting access to the charters was itself a challenge. We are here talking about a reform that is notable as the first effort by government to provide information suo moto about its services and programmes for the benefit of all citizens. Yet,

access to the charters was not easy even for researchers. Furthermore, the information on charters provided on web sites was not always complete or reader friendly. There is no central, comprehensive listing of all charters at one place. It is indeed a sad commentary that those responsible for the reform did not ensure that access to and knowledge about citizen's charters is made easy and simple. How can citizens be empowered when information they are supposed to have is made scarce?

**Design and Content:** Most citizen's charters drafted by government agencies are not designed well. Critical information that end-users need to hold agencies accountable are simply missing from a large number of charters. Thus, the citizen's charter programme has not succeeded in appreciably empowering end-users to demand greater public accountability. When evaluated against standards developed by the department of administrative reforms and public grievances (DARPG), the ministry spearheading the citizen's charter programme, just 27 per cent of the 561 charters reviewed for this report had eight or more of the 10 essential components every citizen's charter is expected to have, such as service quality standards or names and addresses of key officials. Many citizen's charters reviewed in the study appear to have been copied from sample templates.

**Lack of Planning and Support:** It is clear that a reform of this nature cannot be accomplished through a government directive or a few meetings to acquaint officials with the underlying concepts. The evidence from the study shows that the systematic planning and technical support that the agencies needed to design and implement their charters may not have been provided in adequate measure. A major strategic error was to ask all governments, central, state and local, to implement this programme all at once. India is a large and diverse country with varying levels of development in its states. Governments vary in their capacity, resources and incentives to undertake a reform of this nature and complexity. It is possible that some governments saw this reform as the preparation of a glossy document and nothing more. But setting standards of service or a grievance redress

system requires that the organisation is re-engineered and well prepared to deliver them. Prior consultations with users of the service are necessary to identify areas of weakness in the agency. Preparatory work of this nature will invariably call for expert help and advice. It is not clear that provisions were made to assist and motivate the governments and their agencies to undertake such exercises. The preparatory work on charters also needs funds for which no provision may have been made.

These problems may well explain why some states produced very few charters. There is an incentive problem too that further complicates matters. Those in government who benefit from a regime of non-transparency and discretionary decision-making are unlikely to be the champions of citizen's charters. The quotation from the Kerala police charter quoted below the title of this article bears eloquent testimony to this problem. It is reasonable to conclude that all of these factors contributed to the poor performance of the charter initiative. The failure to support the participating governments and their agencies with the needed technical assistance may well have reinforced this end result.

**Charters Are Weak Where It Matters Most:** The spread and quality of charters seem to be better in the relatively more developed states. There is greater access to charters in the southern states, probably because the problems described above are less compelling for them. Similarly, agencies in certain sectors, such as the environmental and industrial sectors, which generally deal with the more educated people or organisations, have drafted citizen's charters of much better quality than agencies in other sectors, such as the social development and agricultural and rural development sectors, which generally cater to the poor and uneducated. In essence, the most poorly drafted citizen's charters are those implemented by agencies, such as those in the social development sector, whose users could most benefit from critical information in a charter, while the most effective charters are drafted by agencies whose users need a charter the least. Once again, this finding reaffirms the importance of technical and financial assistance to the

weaker states and agencies in ensuring proper design and use of charters.

**Importance of Public Awareness:** While commendable that a large number of public service providers have implemented a citizen's charter, only small proportions of end-users and officials are aware of the citizen's charter programme. This is a more general problem that goes beyond citizen's charters. Our public programmes have not yet found effective ways to communicate and educate the people about their value and relevance. Illiteracy and ignorance of a majority of the population makes this task even more difficult. Furthermore, access to citizen's charters is very limited. Most government agencies that have drafted a citizen's charter do not prominently display critical components of the document, such as service delivery standards, in offices. This exacerbates the problem with the result that end-users often lack the knowledge to apply for services or redress their grievances.

**Potential to Empower the People:** There is little evidence that many government agencies assessed the feasibility of implementing a citizen's charter before drafting the document. Given that end-users and lower level officials were rarely consulted before drafting a charter, it appears that most agencies viewed drafting a citizen's charter as a one-time commitment rather than an opportunity to institute fundamental systemic changes to service delivery. After implementation, citizen's charters rarely seem to be updated. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that even poorly designed charters, if made known to the public, can empower them. It appears that the physical display of citizen's charters in government offices has a positive impact on the quality of service delivery. Those who see these charters perhaps learn a bit more about their entitlements than others, and may well demand greater accountability. Willingness to display charters may also indicate that an agency not only has a greater interest in responding to the needs of end-users, but also is more confident in what its charter promises.

**A Mixed Picture:** The findings of the study reveal a mixed picture about the

record of the citizen's charter initiative of GOI. On the positive side, a large number of government agencies and departments have designed and implemented citizen's charters. The southern states and the union territories have led the way in this reform. User feedback shows that applying for services have been made easier in many cases and that the staff have been helpful in their interactions with the public. On the other hand, the study provides significant evidence that many agencies merely complied with the GOI directive to prepare citizen's charters, without taking care that their design and implementation were consistent with the spirit of this directive. The failure to clearly specify standards of service and grievance redress systems in nearly half the agencies testifies to a lack of serious intent on the part of those responsible for the agencies. That substantial proportions of officials in these agencies were also not aware of the content of the charters and were not trained to administer them reaffirms this suspicion.

**Leadership Failure?:** A great deal of information was available to GOI on how to formulate and design citizen's charters. UK and other countries had already gained much experience in implementing this reform. It was also clear that their progress had a lot to do with the commitment and understanding of the political and bureaucratic leaders in these countries. Irrespective of how well the model has worked in other countries, no one will dispute that empowering citizens with information about their rights and entitlements vis-a-vis public agencies is long overdue in India. We often blame our lower level bureaucracy for the poor quality of services and corruption that citizen's encounter in their transactions with public agencies. And these officials may well be indifferent to reforms such as citizen's charters. But the responsibility for the design of charters was not that of the lower level officials. It is those who were in charge of the departments and agencies and who knew the mission and functions of their organisations that had the responsibility to design and guide the charter initiative. If the citizen's charters in many agencies did not measure up to their potential, the responsibility for this

failure must surely be laid at the feet of these leaders.

#### 4 Policy Implications

At first sight, the citizen's charter initiative appears to be a relatively simple task. It entails nothing more than the design and adoption of a slim document that is meant to assist citizens in their interactions with public agencies. Yet, as the preceding sections have shown, there is a complex set of factors underlying this seemingly simple task. The complexity can be traced to three sources.

First, a government department or agency that is motivated to adopt a citizen's charter may lack the capability and resources to see it through. And lack of timely support may stand in the way of effective adoption.

Second, a citizen's charter calls for the institutionalisation of new practices and increased transparency in the agency that adopts it. This is not a mere technical matter, but one that requires that agency leaders and their staff work together towards this goal. Leaders who are not committed to this cause are unlikely to pursue it with seriousness.

Third, the new practices demand significant changes in the behaviour and attitudes of the agency and its staff towards citizens. When organisational and personal incentives clash with the desired changes, then again, progress becomes difficult. That the reform is piloted by a central nodal agency that does not have direct control over these crucial variables further complicates matters. It is against the backdrop of this scenario that we present the following set of policy implications.

It is important to learn from the shortcomings of the citizen's charter programme so that renewed efforts can be made to improve and institutionalise this much needed accountability mechanism. Citizen's charters are unlikely to be effective when certain prerequisites are not in place. For this programme to succeed, government agencies must ascertain the services that must be delivered, consult with end-users to understand their needs, determine service delivery standards that can be realistically implemented, scope any potential organisational restructuring, and train and motivate staff.

**The Case for Internal Champions:** The findings of the study raise fundamental questions about the strategies adopted by the government of India to promote citizen's charters. A devaluation of the rupee or decontrol of prices could be accomplished through a government order. But, as we have seen, the introduction of charters calls for special skills at different levels, and institutional and behavioural changes in the concerned organisations. Large numbers of officials and citizens would need to work together to make this reform succeed. Government orders and policy decisions are necessary, but not sufficient to make this happen. It is unlikely that without strong champions within the government, both at the central and state levels, major changes in the work culture, practices and attitudes of those who work in public agencies could be accomplished. A strong movement that motivates and equips both government leaders and staff to design and deliver services effectively is necessary to prepare the ground to introduce formal citizen's charters. Thus, charters should come at the end of a sequence of steps, and not at the beginning, when the building blocks for service delivery improvements are not yet in place.

**Mission Mode Essential for Success:** To be effective, the citizen's charter initiative should operate in a "mission mode", starting with the specification of desired outcomes and a strategy to achieve them. It cannot be left to a group of officials who are armed solely with government orders, but without the skills, resources, and incentives to achieve their policy goals. Mission mode implies that a dedicated team is given the mandate to achieve the specified goals and outcomes, and is adequately supported by the resources, continuity and flexibility needed for the purpose. Since both central and state governments are involved, this model should be adopted at both levels. It is the best way to build incentives for agencies to make a success of this reform.

**One Size Does Not Fit All:** This huge challenge is rendered even more complex as the capabilities and resources governments and departments need to implement citizen's charters vary significantly across

the country. The highly uneven distribution of citizen's charters across states is clear evidence of this ground reality. Whether citizen's charters should be adopted at one go all over the country is a matter that calls for some reflection. We need to ask whether it is better to proceed in a phased manner when all the pre-conditions necessary for successful implementation across the country cannot be met all at once. For example, some agencies may need more time to specify and agree upon realistic standards of service. In others, additional effort will be required to motivate and equip the staff to participate in this reform exercise. Such organisations could be given time and resources to experiment with standards, grievance redress mechanisms or training. They may also need more time for internal restructuring of the service delivery chain or introducing new systems.

There is considerable scope for the creative use of e-governance methods to make government systems more efficient and transparent. Such innovations, already in operation in several departments/agencies, have demonstrated the value of major internal system improvements that can bring about greater simplicity, transparency and accountability for the benefit of citizens. Citizen's charters that are put in place after these internal reforms will be more credible and useful than those designed as mere desk exercises without any system re-engineering.

The overload on the bureaucracy can also be reduced by being more strategic in the choice of the sectors and agencies where charters should be adopted. Priority, for example, could be given to the agencies with which ordinary citizens have the most interactions. This alone could reduce the load on governments and improve the oversight function of the senior officials in charge of the initiative. Similarly, priority could be given to sectors and agencies that primarily serve the poor and vulnerable. Charters for public distribution system and drinking water deserve to be in the priority category while public works and personnel departments could wait if a government cannot attend to both simultaneously. It is instructive to note that in the UK, 10,000 charters are reported to exist at the local level where ordinary citizens interact with public

agencies. In contrast, there are very few local governments and local service providers with citizen's charters in India. On the other hand, many central ministries (fertilisers, coal, defence and D, etc), that the "aam admi" does not deal with, have charters in place!

**Adapt the Model to the Context:** An important implication of what is stated above is that we should be prepared to tailor the design of citizen's charters to the context and capabilities of the agencies and governments involved. At a minimum, all agencies can be expected to assemble and publicise basic information about the services and functions they provide, the officials in charge of each and the conditions citizens should fulfil to access them. Even if system improvements are difficult, just letting people have the basic information, can bring in more transparency and reduce the scope for abuse and corruption. At the next stage, public agencies should develop norms or standards of service, and grievance redress mechanisms, and make them known to the public. This is clearly a more complex job, and may require more skills and experience to design them. The final stage is when departments/agencies are able to put together all these elements in the form of a "compact" between them and the citizens. Additional items such as compensation clauses, and mechanisms for consultation with and feedback from the public may also be built in at this final stage. If governments are encouraged to think along these lines, the urge to indulge in a nominal exercise can be minimised. Working with agencies that are at different stages is more complicated, but if ultimately it leads to greater receptivity and impact, it will be the right thing to do.

**Provide Technical Assistance:** Adapting the model to varying contexts, and assessing the feasibility of what is most appropriate for different agencies will be done by the better equipped governments on their own. But there is no doubt that others will require additional assistance for implementing charters. Such assistance may be required because existing officials may be busy with their normal duties, and in some cases, because they may not have the skills to undertake this exercise on

their own. Experts or specialists may have to be brought in to assist the agencies to design and implement citizen's charters in a professional manner. Consultations with staff and citizen groups need to be organised systematically and the resulting inputs properly internalised. While this sequence of steps may call for additional time and money, they may be worth the investment. The required budgetary allocation for this purpose and the development or identification of suitable experts to assist the agencies should therefore be part of the reform strategy.

#### Strengthen Oversight of Charter

**Design:** The uneven quality of citizen's charters reviewed for this report signals the absence of an internal oversight mechanism that ensures conformity to established design guidelines. The fact that both central and state governments are involved complicates matters further. It is not implied here that a central oversight body should approve or stamp every charter, but there is a clear case for a more effective, decentralised vetting process, through either regional bodies or expert groups, that supports and clears citizen's charters that are released publicly. This will reduce the tendency to put out incomplete and poorly designed charters in the public domain. Web sites, for example, can be seen by anyone anywhere, and quality control on what gets displayed there must receive high priority. Needless to say, effective oversight will not occur without serious commitment and capacity at the level of state governments.

#### Benchmark Using End-user Feedback:

Systematic monitoring and review of citizen's charters is necessary even after they are approved and placed in the public domain. Performance and accountability tend to suffer when officials are not held responsible for the quality of a charter's design and implementation. In this context, end-user feedback can be a timely aid to assess the progress and outcomes of an agency that has implemented a citizen's charter. This is standard practice for charters implemented in the UK. Reporting and debating such findings annually in the legislature or Parliament can be yet another way to signal to agencies and

their staff that citizen's charters and responsiveness to citizens do indeed matter.

**Hold Top Level Officials Accountable for Results:** All of the above point to the need to make the heads of agencies or other designated senior officials accountable for their respective citizen's charters, much like what has now been done with respect to the RTI Act. It was shocking in the course of the present study to see how officials could simply refuse to share any information on their citizen's charters. That web sites and offices did not offer relevant information on citizen's charter reinforces the wide prevalence of this tendency in an area of reform whose very rationale is information disclosure. Holding public agencies accountable for the delivery of services according to agreed upon standards, and empowering ordinary citizens to demand their entitlements will both remain a mere dream if we fail to follow up on the policy implications discussed above.

#### Include Civil Society in the Process:

Governments need to recognise and support the efforts of civil society groups in solving the problem of information disclosure. Even when officials are unable or unwilling to disseminate information on charters, there is nothing to prevent civil society activists and the media from educating people about citizen's charters. A case in point is Tamil Nadu, where public awareness about charters seems to be the highest. It is perhaps no accident that, in this state, civil society groups have been quite active in informing ordinary people about charters and how they can use their provisions. It is only when people are empowered with information that abuses, including corruption, can be brought under control.

As noted in an earlier section, the citizen's charter programme was launched in India several years ahead of the RTI Act. The RTI Act has provisions that could be used to make citizen's charters work for the people. For example, the RTI Act requires that governments provide information suo motu on their operations wherever it is in the public's interest. Citizen's charters perfectly fit this condition. Yet, as this report's findings show, the proactive disclosure provisions of the RTI Act has not been used to give more teeth to charters. Many NGOs

and activists who support the use of RTI are not even aware that citizen's charters are meant to empower people with information. It is this failure that forces people to apply to government agencies through the legal system for critical information.

Hence the paradox that, despite the presence of citizen's charters, citizens now use RTI, pay a fee, and wait for 30 days to seek information in order to solve their problems with public service providers! It is to prevent this eventuality that citizen's charters were thought of in the first place. Perhaps if citizen's charters were designed and implemented well, a substantial proportion of those who have resorted to using RTI might have avoided these costs and also reduced the burden on the bureaucracy in the process. Indeed, we now have the worst of both worlds. We have citizen's charters that agencies do not fully implement, and citizens who, as a result, incur additional costs by trying to sort out their public service problems through the expensive RTI route. The case for putting in place a more robust citizen's charter programme needs no further argument.

#### NOTES

- 1 GOI has commissioned several evaluation studies of the charters. There have also been a few other assessments by other organisations. These include studies by the National Productivity Council, Consumer Coordination Council and TI India, Delhi. But, by and large, their scope and geographical coverage are limited.
- 2 For further details, see Public Affairs Centre (2007), *India's Citizen's Charters: A Decade of Experience, Bangalore*. The research team consisted of T Sethumadhavan, Sita Shekhar, Meena Nair and Venugopal Reddy.
- 3 The methodology and findings are presented in greater detail in the report referred to above (PAC 2007).
- 4 Essential components included vision/mission of the agency, details of services provided, information on key officials, procedures for access to services, standards of services, costs/fees, grievance redress system, etc.
- 5 "Average" should be interpreted as nothing more than a "pass" mark. In this assessment exercise, the "average" rating was given to the charters that received 26-50 marks out of 100.

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