

# **Community Voice as an Aid to Accountability**

## ***Experiences with Citizen Report Cards in Bangalore***

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### **Abstract**

Emergent narratives in the domain of public accountability increasingly point to the role of community voice in demanding and catalyzing responsiveness and accountability from providers of public utilities. Many civic groups – both formal and informal - are increasingly participating in new and innovative forms of accountability, either in partnership with state organizations or, more frequently, through independent collective actions like social audits, public hearings and mass demonstrations. Woven into this enabling emergent tapestry of civic initiatives, is the demonstrated potency of information backed citizen voice-led interventions. A major arena where these new citizen-led accountability initiatives are playing out is in the delivery of public utilities like Water & Sanitation, Power, Health, Education, Telecommunications etc. Faced with very few exit options, communities are finding creative use of voice mechanisms to effectively bring in reforms. One such tool is the Citizen Report Card pioneered by Public Affairs Centre – an independent not for profit institution in Bangalore India. Anchoring around the twin concepts of measurement and comparison, Citizen Report Cards provides citizens and agencies with qualitative and quantitative information about gaps in service delivery. It can also measure the level of awareness about citizens' rights and responsibilities.

This paper discusses how Citizen Report Cards triggered reforms in public utilities in the city of Bangalore, especially in enhancing accountability and responsiveness; the paper, in particular will focus on water sector reforms. In Bangalore, three report cards were prepared through a civil society initiative in 1994, 1999 and 2003. The first report card gave very low ratings to all the major service providers of the city, creating a sense of shame in the process. But it did not make an immediate impact as only a few of the providers acknowledged their problems and took corrective action. The second report card showed that partial improvement had occurred in some services, probably due to the actions taken by their providers and the pressure from civil society. The third report card that followed after four years revealed substantial improvement in almost all the service providers. There was not only a significant increase in citizen satisfaction with the services, but also a visible decline in corruption. The big question is: what caused this surprising turnaround?

The drivers of change were several. Some worked on the demand side of services. Others influenced the service providers from the supply side. In terms of sequence, the trigger for public action seems to have been the report cards and the public glare and media publicity they created. This led to important interventions from the supply side. A strategic decision came from the state government that set up a new public-private partnership forum to catalyze and assist the service providers to upgrade their services and responsiveness. The political support and commitment of the state's Chief Minister, the innovative practices brought in by the partnership forum, the proactive role of external catalysts such as civil society groups and donors, and the learning that came from the experiments initiated by the different players all jointly contributed to the better performance of the city's service providers.

There are many lessons to be learned from this experience. Improved performance does take time. It took several years for a turnaround to occur in Bangalore's services, But it does highlight the continuing pressure that community-initiated voice mechanisms like citizen report cards can exert on service delivery agencies. It is clear that a relatively open and democratic society is a pre-requisite for the use of this monitoring and accountability tool. Advocacy and public glare through civil society and media pressure can stimulate positive responses from the government. Above all, the political commitment and support that eventually emerged in Bangalore is an essential enabling factor to promote and sustain reform.

## 1 Introduction

A major fault-line in governance where corruption appears to be rampant and impinges directly on the everyday life of citizens in India (and most developing countries) is the domain of public services. Though the state has made many impressive strides in expanding the access of citizens to basic public service infrastructure, the poor quality of service delivery and the high levels of rent seeking behaviour by public officials point to extremely low levels of public accountability. Before we proceed further on the issue of low levels of accountability and responsiveness in public services, it is necessary to understand the context in which they operate.<sup>1</sup> First of all, the state has traditionally been the dominant in this area, and often the sole provider of public services in India. The downside of this 'monopoly power' is that users of most public services do not have the option to 'exit' from one supplier to another. It also creates a pronounced tendency on the part of the service providers to withhold information from the customers thus creating huge information gaps that makes it difficult for the customers or users of the services to demand accountability.

Second, there is little evidence that those in authority who are charged with enforcing public accountability are always effective and committed to this task. The absence of market competition has not been compensated for by any other institutional mechanism to ensure efficient service delivery. Traditional mechanisms such as public audit of government expenditure and legislative oversight focus only on a review of inputs. Expenditures are audited to see whether proper procedures and norms have been adhered to. While this is an aspect of accountability, it does not tell us anything about how well the money was spent. This is because very little attention is given to the outputs and outcomes of the inputs. The problem is exacerbated by the difficulties in measuring outputs and in monitoring field level activities. Legislative oversight has been blunted by the vastness of the scope of services and the lack of information available to the legislators. An even more disturbing problem is the collusion between service providers and those responsible for monitoring their performance. The internal working and decision making of public agencies cannot easily be monitored or even observed by those outside the system. The scope for the pursuit of parochial and self-serving interests and for corruption is considerable under the circumstances.

Third, citizens—who directly or indirectly pay for all public services—are seldom able to engage in sustained collective action to demand increased public accountability from the service providers they deal with. There is an implicit assumption that once people elect a government, it is for the latter to enforce accountability on all service providers. Perhaps an even more important reason for this attitude of citizens is that their motivation to engage in collective action is usually weak. The fact that the severity of problems people face concerning public services generally tend to vary from day to day and from household to household shows that sustaining collective action is difficult even when a group is able to initiate action at some point in time. Some people may not invest time and energy for collective action as they feel they could get a 'free ride' from the success of the efforts of others in any case. This is a major reason why the incentives for collective action are weak except in certain critical situations.

Fourth, the legal framework of the country can be a barrier to improved public accountability. Administrators typically try to work within the framework of the laws and regulations of their organisations. Accounts get audited because a law requires them to do

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<sup>1</sup> Paul, S 2002, *Holding the State to Account: Citizen Feedback in Action*, Books for Change, Bangalore.

so. Investments are made according to the laws and regulations governing the organisation. If the law is silent on the standards and other attributes of services, provider agencies are likely to pay less attention to them.

Under these circumstances, the brunt of deficiencies in service, leave “poor people vulnerable to rudeness, humiliation and inhuman treatment by both private and public agents of the state<sup>2</sup>”, even when they seek services they are entitled to under the law of the land. The difficulties in accessing services are aggravated by the physical and social environment that the poor live in.

Dissatisfaction with services arising from these deficiencies is compounded by the helplessness among poor people about public institutions, which they see as not accountable or as responsive only to the powerful and rich segments of society. Reforms have generated opportunities and mechanisms that empower better off citizens over others, since they require legally literate ways that are beyond the poor<sup>3</sup>. This probably explains why the poor who encounter difficulty in gaining access to services are less likely to approach authorities than better off households and need to take the support of ‘voice’ mechanisms.

These experiences of the poor reflect the inadequacy and difficulties encountered by the poor. On the other hand, these experiences also reflect more basic realities of state-citizen relationship beyond the service in question - on the manner in which the poor are organized as citizens, their relationship and mechanisms of interface with the state, and the changing character of the state.

Given this highly disabling environment, what are the practical ways to use ‘voice and participation’ to change the highly disabling ambience of public service delivery? Increasing opportunities for citizens’ voice and participation can create powerful incentives for change in one major direction: when competition is absent, as in the case of most public goods, popular voice can reduce information asymmetries which can challenge service providers to perform better and lower transaction costs.<sup>4</sup> When low incentives and weak monitoring combine to produce inefficient public services, voice mechanisms can inform public officials of the problems and act as pressure forces for demanding improvements.<sup>5</sup>

The rest of the paper examines the evolution, applications and impact of one such voice mechanism - the Citizen Report Card - as a potent tool to demand public accountability.

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<sup>2</sup> Narayan, D., Patel, R., Schafft, K., Rademacher, A. and Koche-Schulte, S., 2000, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?*, Oxford University Press, New York

<sup>3</sup> Goetze, A.M. and Gaventa, J., 2001, “Bringing citizen voice and client focus into service delivery”, IDS Working Paper 138, Sussex: IDS

<sup>4</sup> Paul, S 1998, ‘Making Voice Work: The Report Card on Bangalore’s Public Services’, *Policy Research Working Paper no. 1921*, The World Bank, Washington DC.

<sup>5</sup> Dreze, J and Amartya Sen 1999, ‘Public Action and Social Inequality’, in Barbara Harriss-White and Sunil Subramanian (Eds), *Illfare in India: Essays on India’s Social Sector in Honour of S. Guhan*, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

## **1.1 Citizen Report Card: The Context**

Bangalore, the capital of the State of Karnataka, is one of India's large cosmopolitan cities, with a current population of around 6 million. The city expanded very rapidly since the 1980s, putting immense pressure on public service providers to cope with increased demand for essential services. The city's services deteriorated significantly between the late 80's and mid 90's, after which major changes and improvements took place.

At the root of the problems in Bangalore was the rapid growth of the city, from a population of 1.2 million in 1961 to 4.1 million in 1991. Although the local government, called the Bangalore City Corporation, with an elected Mayor and Council, and a large complement of civil servants, was mandated to provide services such as solid waste disposal, maintenance of roads, permissions for erecting new buildings, etc., other services such as drinking water, public transport, electricity, security and traffic management were provided by separate agencies set up by the State Government. Urban planning and expansion of housing were facilitated by yet another agency. Annex 1 gives the list of key service providers in Bangalore.

By the early nineties, the situation in the city was not only one of inadequate and low quality public services, but also of a sense of helplessness among ordinary people about resolving such problems. Electricity, water, garbage removal, and other essential services were both unreliable and difficult to access. People waited for years to get new telephone connections. Roads were in bad shape, especially in residential areas. Pedestrian sidewalks, parks and other civic amenities were poorly maintained. There was a widespread impression that it was difficult to get assistance from service providers without bribes.

There was no institutional mechanism for coordinating the activities of different service providers until 1999. Each agency formulated policies and plans depending on its priorities and resources. Administrative systems provided little room for direct consultation with city residents, to establish priorities, plan or monitor services.

Slum dwellers, who accounted for a large proportion of the urban poor and approximately 25% of city residents, were a fast growing population. Their problems were similar to those faced by slum dwellers in other cities: civic agencies were reluctant to provide services without a land title, the high density of habitation placed pressure on the minimal infrastructure and subsidized services were needed, etc. Bangalore's slums were scattered across the city, and urban growth created pressure to move the slums.

The misery in the city was sustained by a sense of resignation among citizens. There were no loud protests or public agitations demanding an overall improvement in services. In retrospect, one could largely attribute the lack of corrective action by service providers to this deficit in collective action by city residents. There were very few neighborhood associations in Bangalore to take up civic issues. Most city based NGOs directed their attention to specific segments such as children, women and slum dwellers. The poor level of organization in civil society matched the low level of concern among activists and leading citizens to fight against the dismal public services in their own backyard.

It was against this disabling backdrop that a small citizens' group in Bangalore led by Dr. Samuel Paul, a distinguished academic and internationally renowned public sector expert, organised a public feedback exercise with some friends as a concerned citizen's response to the appalling quality of civic services. The survey was carried out by a supportive market research firm, Marketing and Business Associates, with survey costs met through

local donations. The response this experiment evoked in both state and non-state arenas led to the formation of 'Public Affairs Centre' (PAC) in Bangalore as a national institute dedicated to improve the quality of governance in India in 1994. Over the past nine years, PAC has emerged as a major resource centre for stimulating public action through focused knowledge creation.

## 1.2 Citizen Report Card: The Concept

Citizen Report Cards (CRCs) on public utilities, pioneered by PAC is now widely recognised as a powerful voice mechanism. Anchoring on the concept of user feedback, 'citizen report cards' provide a simple and widely replicable tool for improving transparency and public accountability. When citizens' voice provides an objective assessment of both qualitative and quantitative aspects of different public services, based on first-hand interactions with the agencies providing these services, it is possible to rank the agencies on the quality of performance. This 'report card' can then be used to stimulate collective action by citizens, and provide organisational leaders with an opportunity to design reforms and bring in a strategic reorientation.<sup>6</sup> Experiences with report cards, both national and international, have amply demonstrated its potential for demanding more public accountability and providing a credible database to facilitate proactive civil society responses.

The CRC Methodology presents a simple but highly flexible approach for organizing public feedback.<sup>7</sup> The methodology envisages the following objectives:

- Generate citizen feedback on the degree of satisfaction with the services provided by various public service agencies and also, provide reliable estimates of corruption and other hidden costs
- Catalyze citizens to adopt pro-active stances by demanding more accountability, accessibility and responsiveness from the service providers
- Serve as a diagnostic tool for service providers, external consultants and analysts/researchers to facilitate effective prognosis and solutions
- Encourage public agencies to adopt and promote citizen friendly practices, design performance standards and facilitate transparency in operations.

In more practical terms, Citizen Report Cards give the following strategic inputs:

- a. *Provide benchmarks on access, adequacy and quality of public services as experienced by citizens:* Citizen Report Cards go beyond the specific problems that individual citizens face and place each issue in the perspective of other elements of service design and delivery, as well as a comparison with other services, so that a strategic set of actions can be initiated.
- b. *Provide measures of citizen satisfaction to prioritise corrective actions:* Citizen Report Cards capture citizens' feedback in clear, simple and unambiguous fashion by indicating their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. When this measure of citizen satisfaction or dissatisfaction is viewed from a comparative perspective, it gives very valuable information to prioritise corrective actions. For example, the most basic feedback a citizen may give about power supply is total dissatisfaction. To appreciate this feedback, it must be related to the ratings given to other services by the same

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<sup>6</sup> Gopakumar, K 1997, 'Public Feedback as an aid to Public Accountability: Reflections on an innovative approach', *Public Administration and Development*, vol. 17, pp. 281-82.

<sup>7</sup> Upp, S 1995, *Making the Grade: A guide to implement the Report Card Methodology*, Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore.

person. For example, water supply may be rated worse than power supply. When these two pieces of information are compared, one can conclude that power supply may be a cause of dissatisfaction, but the priority for corrective action may be on water supply.

- c. *Provide indicators of problem areas in the delivery of public services:* Citizen Report Cards enquire into specific aspects of interaction between the service agency and the citizen, and seek to identify issues experienced by citizens in interfacing with the services. In more simple terms, Citizen Report Cards suggest that dissatisfaction has causes, which may be related to the quality of services enjoyed by citizens (like reliability of power supply, or availability of medicines in a public hospital); difficulties encountered while dealing with the agency to solve service related issues like excess billing or complaints of power supply breakdown.
- d. *Provide reliable estimates on corruption and other hidden costs:* Corruption, though widespread and rampant, often exists in the realm of anecdotes without any quantitative base. This 'subjectivity' of corruption has severely undermined both corrective and collective responses.
- e. *Provides a mechanism to explore citizens' alternatives for improving public services:* Citizen Report Cards go beyond collecting feedback on existing situations from citizens. They are also a means of testing out different options that citizens wish to exercise, individually or collectively, to tackle various problems. For example, Citizen Report Cards can provide information on whether citizens are willing to pay more for better quality of services or be part of citizens' bodies made responsible for managing garbage clearance in the locality.

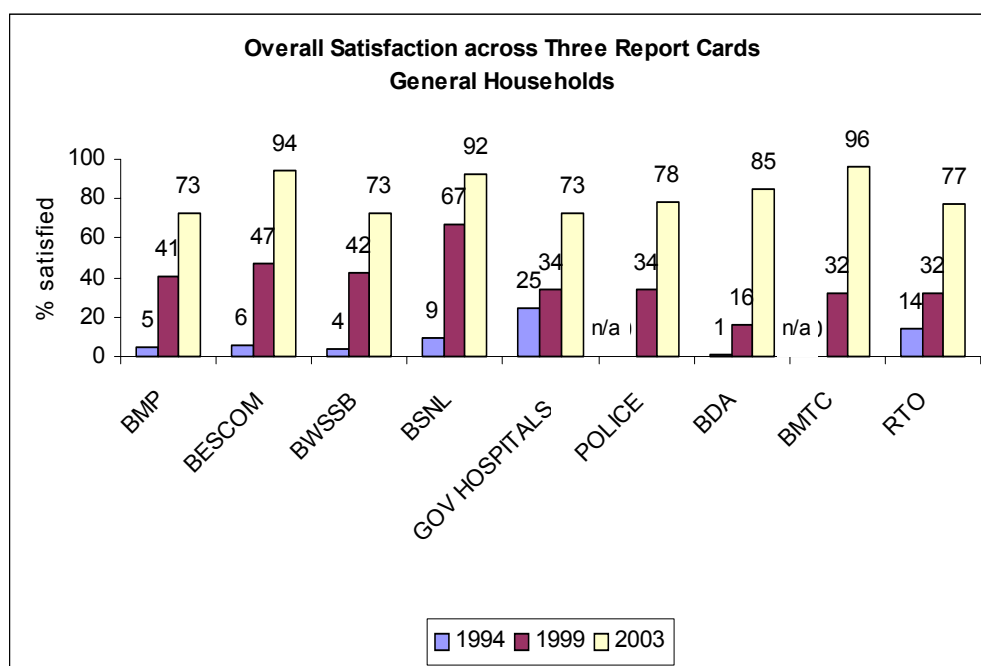
A typical CRC study is organised along the following lines:

- ⇒ Identification of issues through Focus Group Discussions
- ⇒ Designing the survey instrument
- ⇒ Identifying the scientific sample for the survey
- ⇒ Survey by an independent agency
- ⇒ Collection of qualitative data
- ⇒ Placing the results in the public domain
- ⇒ Advocacy and partnerships.

The increasing application of Report Cards reflects a growing awareness of the potency of empirical approaches to provide useful trigger mechanisms for mobilising effective and focused demand constituencies. Empirical approaches have also helped to quantify and give shape to many themes, which hitherto existed in the realms of the abstract (corruption being a good case in point).

## 2 Citizen Report Cards in Bangalore: An Overview

Before embarking to discuss the specific impact of CRCs on the Water & Sanitation sector in Bangalore, it is useful to chart the overall impact across different sectors. The findings of the first CRC on Bangalore were most striking. Almost all of the public service providers received low ratings from the people. Agencies were rated and compared in terms of public satisfaction, corruption, and responsiveness. The media publicity that the findings received and the public discussions that followed brought the issue of public services out in the open. Civil society groups began to organize themselves to voice their demands for better performance. Some of the public agencies responded to these demands and took steps to improve their services. The inter-agency comparisons and the associated public glare seem to have contributed to this outcome. When the second report card on Bangalore came out in 1999, these improvements were reflected in the somewhat better ratings that the agencies received. Still several agencies remained indifferent and corruption levels continued to be high<sup>8</sup>. The third CRC on Bangalore in 2003 has shown a surprising turnaround in the city's services (See the chart below). It noted a remarkable rise in the citizen ratings of almost all the agencies<sup>9</sup>. Not only did public satisfaction improve across the board, but problem incidence and corruption seem to have declined perceptibly in the routine transactions between the public and the agencies. It is clear that more decisive steps have been taken by the agencies to improve services between 1999 and 2003.



Legend: BMP – Bangalore City Corporation; BESCOM – Bangalore Electricity Company; BWSSB – Bangalore Water Supply & Sewerage Board; BSNL – Bangalore Telephone Company; BDA – Bangalore Development Authority; BMTC – Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation and; RTO – Road Transport Authority

<sup>8</sup> See No.1 above

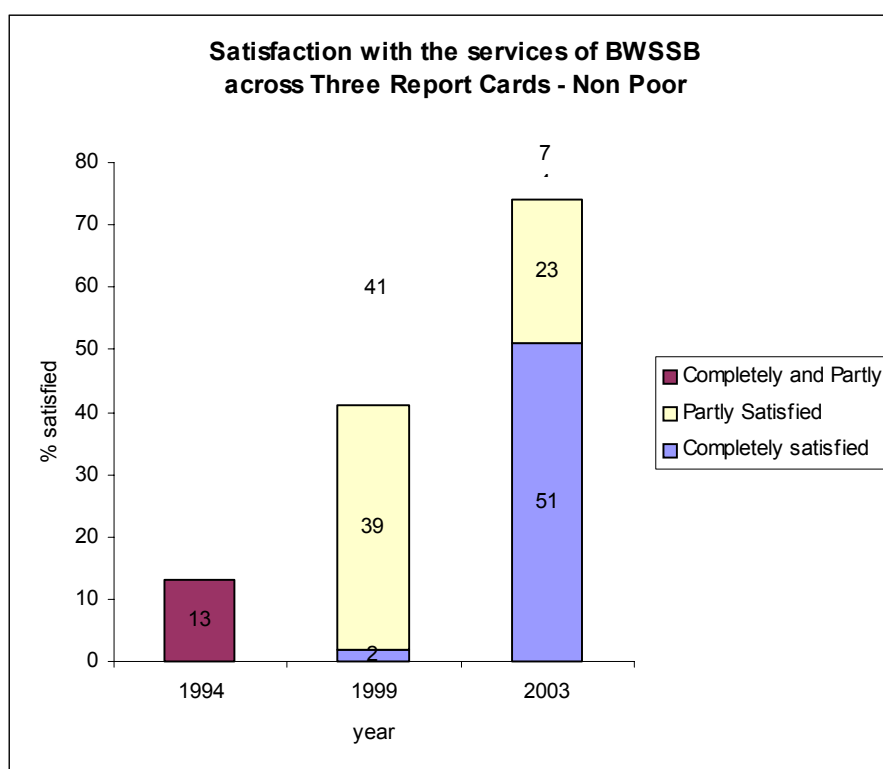
<sup>9</sup> Paul, S 2005, *Citizen Report Cards in Bangalore: A case study in accountability*, Mimeo, Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore.

### 3 Citizen Report Cards in the Water Sector

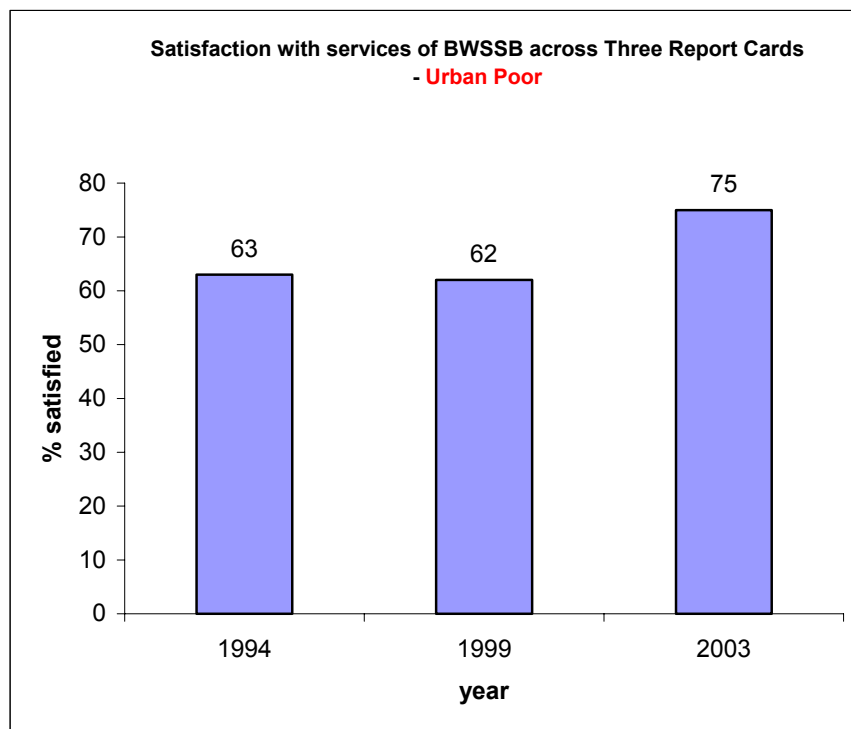
Water supply to the city of Bangalore is managed by the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board - a public owned water utility created in 1964. Interestingly, although the BWSSB is responsible for providing for the city of Bangalore, the chairman of the board is appointed by and reports directly to the state government of Karnataka. “Slum dwellers as a constituency have no direct say in matters governing parastatals, and their only local vote is cast in favor of a ward councilor who may or may not have any real power. Given the current climate of half-hearted decentralization of state powers to local bodies, this government structure continues to create friction, as well as opportunities to shirk responsibility for the provision of water to slums<sup>10</sup>”.

#### 3.1 Improvements in services between 1994 and 2003

The quality of services from a user perspective was benchmarked and periodically assessed by the Public Affairs Centre, through three separate citizen report card studies over the last ten years. A comparison of the performance of BWSSB’s services over the last ten years reveals a significant improvement in the satisfaction of both urban poor and non poor users.



<sup>10</sup> Connors, Genevieve 2005, ‘When utilities muddle through: pro-poor governance in Bangalore’s public water sector’, *Environment & Urbanization*, vol.17, no.1, pp 201-217



The chart above indicates an across the board improvement in the satisfaction with all the agencies, and serve to raise a number questions. Does the improvement in satisfaction reflect real changes that might have occurred in the quality of services, responsiveness of the service providers, and efficiency of service delivery? Did the need for interaction with the agencies significantly decrease? What actions might have been taken by the government and its service providers to achieve such positive outcomes? The comparative charts below provide some answers to these questions.

**Problem incidence:** People are likely to be more satisfied when they have fewer problems in getting a service or interacting with an agency. “Problem incidence” of this type can be measured by comparing the proportions of users who face problems with the agencies. Service related problems can be of two types. Some problems are of a routine nature, like billing errors. Other problems could be more complex and occur in the context special services like getting a building sanction or a water supply connection. The following table highlights feedback from both poor and non-poor users in this regard:

Year	Proportion of Non Poor Users Reporting a Problem	Proportion of Poor Users Reporting a Problem
1999	31	38
2003	19	28

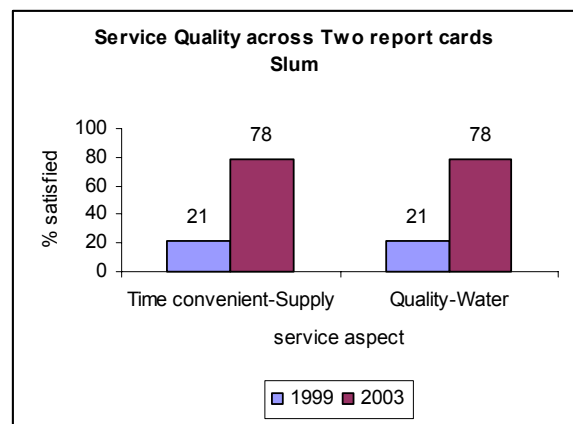
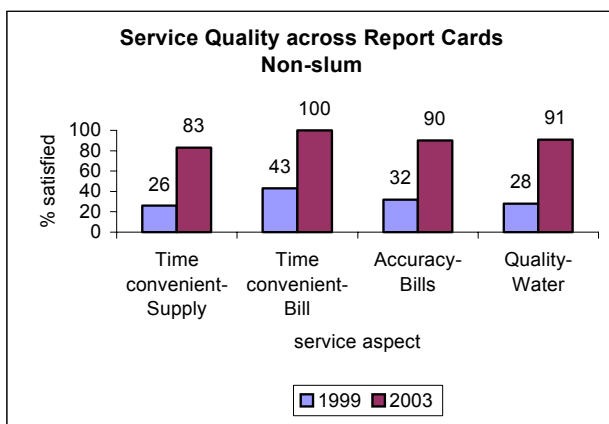
The reduction of problems is an important reason for the improvement in levels of satisfaction. This reduction in problems is in line with investments to augment capacity, introduction of IT enabled services and other initiatives to improve efficiency of service delivery by the agencies that have taken place since 1999. The findings serve to indicate how reduction in the intensity of routine problems translates into fewer interactions with the service provider, thereby reducing the scope for delay, harassment or corruption.

**Satisfaction with the quality of service:** The reduction in problems described above has been matched by significant improvement in satisfaction with behavior of staff.

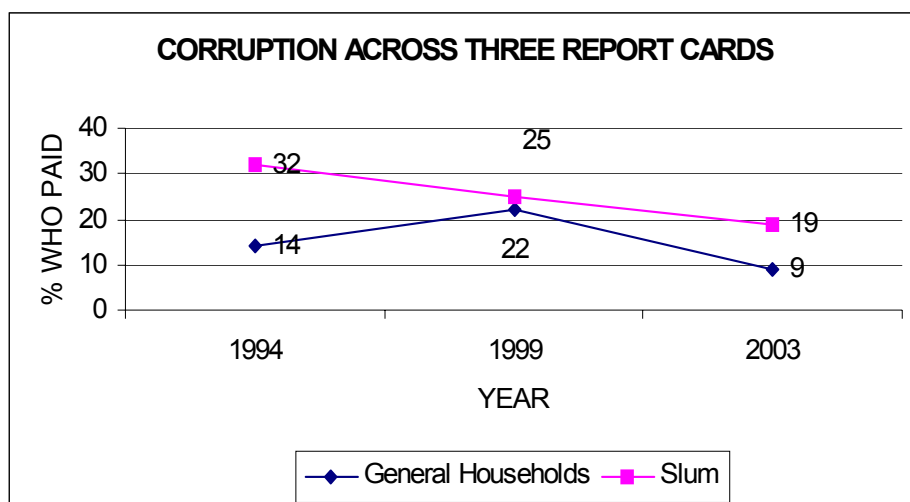
Year	Proportion of Non Poor Users Reporting complete satisfaction with staff behavior	Proportion of Poor Users Reporting complete satisfaction with staff behavior
1994	26	NA
1999	54	33
2003	92	100

Clearly, there has been a positive and substantial change in staff behavior over time. It is difficult to imagine that people who gave low ratings in the past to the same staff would applaud them now without valid reasons. While improved procedures have reduced the possibility of abuse of discretion, most agencies have invested heavily in training their staff. These efforts may have positively influenced the attitude and mindset of staff. In spite of the relatively higher frequency of incidence of problems, users who interacted with BWSSB gave it's staff very high ratings (in fact, BWSSB ranked first among all agencies in this regard).

Alongside, there have also been significant improvements in other indicators of service delivery like timing of water supply and accuracy of billing, across both poor and non-poor domains:



**Encounters with corruption:** An important question is whether service improvement has been accompanied by a reduction in corruption. Earlier report cards did not show any improvement on the corruption front. In fact, it had worsened (in the case of the non-poor), according to the report card of 1999. But a dramatic finding of the latest report card shows that corruption prevalent in the routine transactions with agencies has come down for the first time.



Though, on an average, one in five poor household paid a bribe to get their work done at one agency or other, the phenomenon has come down drastically in the water sector.

Year	Proportion of Non Poor Users Reporting payment of bribes	Proportion of Poor Users Reporting payment of bribes
1994	12	NA
1999	11	04
2003	01	01

#### 4 Explaining the Turnaround

In summary, the most recent report card findings show that a significant turnaround has taken place in Bangalore's public services over a 10-year period. The improvement in public satisfaction levels cuts across all the major service providers. It is reflected in feedback provided by both middle-income and low-income households. Positive changes in specific indicators, while showing some variation, are consistent with the higher overall satisfaction ratings of the different agencies.

There is also a surprising degree of internal consistency in the findings. The results seem to indicate that various reforms and streamlining within agencies have reduced the problems or hassles that people encounter during their interactions with agency staff, which in turn has diminished the scope for petty corruption. This finding has important implications for corruption control strategies. Reducing the incidence of problems has also served to ease overload on agency staff, which in turn has allowed better service to all customers. This may explain the higher ratings for staff behaviour in 2003 for most agencies.

Unlike similar improvements which have taken place in different parts of the world, under new charismatic Mayors or large donor assisted reforms, the Bangalore story had no such single converging point. Instead, the experience is about a series of linked actions that happened during this period of change, involving a wide range of stakeholders, particularly

communities and civil society. Moreover, these improvements took place over a fairly long period of time, and have experienced ups and downs, a pattern expected in such change.

However, the drivers of change in Bangalore can be divided into two categories<sup>11</sup>. On the one hand, demand-side factors such as citizen and media pressure sparked and sustained the initiative. This required the context of an open democratic society with institutionalized tolerance of dissent and debate. On the other hand, supply-side factors, in the form of government action to implement reforms, were also indispensable. The government response made possible the interaction between citizens and agencies that led to positive outcomes in improvement of services.

#### **4.1 Demand Factors Contributing to Success**

In the decade-long report card experience in Bangalore, it is possible to identify four factors on the demand side that worked together to sustain pressure for change. Most important were the report cards themselves and advocacy by a diverse network of civil society groups. These were reinforced by media attention and by behind-the-scenes support from international donor agencies. These factors operated both in sequence and interactively. Thus the first report card stimulated media publicity as well as civil society activism. By the time of the second report card, civic groups and the Public Affairs Centre were working together to maximize their joint impact.

##### **4.1.1 The Glare Effect of Citizen Report Cards**

The Bangalore report cards exerted pressure on the city's service providers in three ways. First, by providing focused information on performance from the perspective of citizens, the reports put the agencies under a public scanner. Such information was new to them, and as much of it was negative, it had the effect of publicly shaming the poor performers. Evidence from the corporate world shows that measuring and quantifying work and outputs tends to make organizations pay more attention to what is being measured. Something similar seems to have happened in the Bangalore service agencies. Public agencies tend to be sensitive to adverse publicity, especially in a democracy.

Second, interagency comparisons seem to have worked as a surrogate for market competition. Although each service provider is a monopoly within its distinctive area of activity, the report card sets up a competitive arena by permitting interagency comparison of common attributes. Users of services, the media, and civil society groups see delays, bribery, and non-responsiveness as negative features in any service provider. The fact that the chairmen of some of the agencies called PAC to find out where they stood in the second report card before its findings were released shows that organizations do pay attention to how the public views them. They wanted to know not only whether their ratings had improved, but also whether they ranked higher or lower than others. This was the case despite objections by the same officials to public release of interagency comparisons.

Third, it appears that some agency chairmen, at least, saw the report card as an aid in their efforts to reform their agencies. Although the feedback on their agencies was initially negative, these leaders took a positive view of the exercise. They used the findings to goad their colleagues to take action to improve services. This shows that a report card, when prepared impartially and professionally, can encourage the more proactive among public leaders to move ahead on the reform front. A recent assessment of the Bangalore initiative states that several agencies characterized the report cards as a

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<sup>11</sup> See no. 9 above

“catalyst<sup>12</sup>”. The same report quotes one agency leader as saying that PAC’s work on satisfaction levels and on quality of services had a profound effect on him as a public manager. Some agencies subsequently adopted the practice of preparing their own report cards, thus affirming the value of user feedback as an internal management tool.

It is important to note that the report card was not a one-time initiative ending with the dissemination of findings. Rather, the first report card was followed up by two more within 10 years, and by ongoing advocacy for more responsive and efficient agencies.

#### **4.1.2 Demand Pressure through Civil Society Groups**

The report cards helped stimulate complementary public advocacy work, with the two factors together having a cumulative impact on the government and citizens of Bangalore. This advocacy, spearheaded by PAC, was carried out through a network of civic groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the city. The number of such groups increased significantly in the period following the first report card. Only about 20 were active in 1994; by 2000, their number exceeded 200. Not all of them were dynamic groups. Even so, many did participate in the campaigns and meetings organized by PAC, adding to the public pressure on service providers.

The network included two types of organizations. Neighbourhood groups called residents’ associations focus on one part of the city but have a direct interest in the performance of all the service providers. Citywide NGOs focus on specific civic or service-related issues. Both kinds of organizations participated in public meetings and seminars where report cards or other civic issues were discussed. These meetings engaged the service providers in active public dialogues, in contrast to the closed personal meetings with officials that previously were customary in all agencies. Some service providers, such as the electricity board, the water and sanitation board, and even the police, subsequently organized their own forums, inviting civil society groups for dialogue. As a result, interactions between organized civic groups and the service providers grew significantly.

Civic advocacy increased the stimulus for reform and responsiveness on the part of the service providers. This was already evident in 1999. After a public meeting held in Bangalore in connection with the second report card, a leading newspaper, the *Times of India*, said in an editorial: “PAC, in creating this forum, has opened doors, even windows, for a healthy tête-à-tête with our service providers. The honesty on display was remarkable . . . this is the spirit of democracy in action. Civil society working in tandem with government for the greater good of all” (November 8, 1999).

In addition to such meetings, several NGOs have made distinctive contributions by carrying out citywide campaigns on specific issues. These campaigns, in most cases assisted by partnership with PAC, have served to strengthen the city’s “social capital.” One NGO undertook advocacy work linked to property tax reform. Another examined the municipal budget and engaged the city corporation in a debate on service efficiency and public expenditure. A third worked on the improvement of solid waste management. These diverse interventions all signalled to the service providers that their activities were being watched and assessed in a systematic fashion. In different ways, all these civil society groups were demanding better services and accountability from the government and its agencies.

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<sup>12</sup> Ravindra, Adikesavalu 2004, *An Assessment of Bangalore Citizen Report Cards on the Performance of Public Agencies*, (mimeo), OED, The World Bank, Washington DC

### **4.1.3 Reinforcement of Pressure by the Media**

The print media in Bangalore played an unusual role by adding their weight to the pressure for better services. In 1994 the newspapers did little more than publicise the negative findings of the report card or other similar critical assessments. Investigative reports on civic issues were few and far between. Subsequently, however, the newspapers began to take a much more proactive role.

After deciding to devote more space to public service problems and related civic issues, several newspapers sought PAC's advice and technical support for special features. One newspaper began a series of reports on the different wards of the city, highlighting their problems and focusing on their elected council members. This was followed by another innovative campaign that newspapers seldom undertake, through which they organized interactive meetings in different parts of the city for citizens to voice specific problems to senior officials from selected city agencies. A large number of public officials were thus exposed to the issues of the localities and stimulated to respond with answers. FM radio channels also provide opportunities for city residents to call in and raise questions on key issues. This public process clearly put increased pressure on the agencies to be more transparent and accountable and to deliver on their promises.

### **4.1.4 The Role of International Donors**

While international donors work most visibly on the supply side of problems by providing loans, grants, and technical assistance, there is some evidence that in Bangalore donor involvement also added to the pressure on the demand side. A good case in point is the commitments made by the State Government to the World Bank, in seeking the Karnataka Economic Restructuring Loan (KERL) in 2001. The commitments included a wide range of initiatives related to better governance, ranging from transparency measures and introducing the Right to Information, power sector reforms and greater stability of tenure for the bureaucracy. Since these measures were part of the commitment in the loan agreement, they were to be implemented in a time bound manner, and compliance monitored objectively before subsequent tranches of the loan were released. This induced both urgency and greater willingness in the implementation of reforms, which also served to improve service delivery. These signals may well have reinforced the demand pressure on the agencies from the other sources discussed above.

## **4.2 Supply Factors Contributing to Success**

A key trigger which complemented the above mentioned demand-side factors was the change in government in 1999 and the setting up of an innovative public-private partnership - the Bangalore Agenda Task Force (BATF) in 2000, one year after the second report card. This step, an initiative of the new chief minister of Karnataka state, was reinforced by institutional innovations, by new accountability mechanisms, by an active state ombudsman, and by continued political commitment of the state government.

### **4.2.1 Innovative Partnerships**

Until 1999, the modest improvements in services that occurred in Bangalore and that were reflected in the second report card resulted from actions taken by the agency leaders on their own initiative. The constraints within which they operated limited the scope of the reforms they could attempt.

The scene changed for the better in 2000 when the new chief minister created the Bangalore Agenda Task Force (BATF) to work in partnership with the major service providers. This step, coming only a few months after the release of the second report

card, showed the government's determination to deal with the problems being experienced by the public. BATF was made up of several prominent persons from the private and professional sectors along with the chairpersons of key public service agencies. This public-private partnership was authorized to mobilize funds and expertise to assist and stimulate change in the functioning of these agencies, and to involve the public in appropriate ways in the process. It provided a forum for the service providers to test and experiment with reform ideas, seek assistance, and give an account of their actions.

BATF launched a series of six monthly summits where service providers made statements on their plans, outcomes, and commitments, and citizens were invited to listen and respond. These summits were also attended by the chief minister, who personally questioned the heads of agencies on their plans and achievements. BATF thus became a forum for accountability and for monitoring by the public, creating greater openness and a sense of public participation. BATF also brought out report cards on the progress of its own work.

The private donations mobilized by BATF enabled the service providers to experiment with new systems, practices, and infrastructural options. Government funds would not have given them the degree of flexibility that private funds did. The professional expertise that BATF made available allowed the service providers to explore new options they might not otherwise have considered. BATF had no legal or administrative authority over the public agencies with which it worked. It did not approve their budgets or oversee their programs or projects. Its influence stemmed from its partnership and catalytic mode of operation, reinforced by direct political support from the chief minister. His participation in the summits was a testimony to his commitment, and made it possible for BATF to solve tricky problems of coordination between some of the service providers in the course of these meetings. Agency leaders found the strategic inputs and assistance provided by BATF to be valuable and timely.

#### **4.2.2 Co-opting client power into partnerships:**

The Water Board and the Electricity Company made systematic efforts to dialogue with residents of the city through Open Houses in partnership with NGOs such as PAC, and by organizing Adalats (forums for grievance redress) in their operating zones. These city agencies also reorganized the bill collection systems by making collection centres operate on weekends and evening hours to suit the convenience of clients. Most city agencies brought out simple brochures and guides to help residents access their services with ease. These efforts reflected a deeper understanding of clients, and a willingness to meet their legitimate demands to information and convenient service.

##### ***The Water Adalats (Courts) of BWSSB***

BWSSB has set up Water Adalats to settle disputes regarding over billing and wrong billing. These Adalats function in all 17 divisions of BWSSB in the city of Bangalore. These Adalats consist of the concerned Executive Engineer, assistant Executive Engineer and the accountant. Disputes to the tune of Indian Rupees 1000 are settled by the Executive Engineer while higher amounts are forwarded to the Board Appeal Committee.

The willingness of the poor to pay for assured services was the basis for a major change in approach to slum dwellers. In the past, the urban poor were often denied basic services at their houses on the grounds that such a provision would amount to acceptance of rights to occupation of state property. This meant that the poor had to seek alternate access to these services, through middlemen or illegal connections, which often involved significant costs. However, this reluctance in the agencies was replaced with a concerted effort to get the urban poor to

take paid connections for water and power, whereby the poor got better service and the agencies some revenue.

Most city agencies strengthened their grievance redressal systems. As a result, residents who needed service or were dissatisfied with some aspect of service could leave complaints on Interactive Voice Recorder systems, in the case of services such as electric power and water supply. This facility enabled the client to contact providers in a timely and effective manner for problems, instead of making repeated visits to these offices to seek assistance.

#### ***4.2.3 Leveraging voice for greater accountability:***

The common thread that runs through the different supply side interventions discussed above is the political commitment and support of the Chief Minister of the state. This was a weak factor during the period 1994-1999. The change in the chief ministership in 1999 made a decisive difference. Instead of ignoring or downplaying critical feedback, the political leadership of the State offered legitimacy and space for voice of citizens to be expressed. As a result, a wide range of civil society institutions, from resident welfare associations to well established NGOs, were able to reach out to the Government in relation to issues such as property taxation, location of flyovers, and the like, without having to take recourse to one sided protests. This willingness to listen also meant that judicial recourse in public interest could be avoided to a greater extent.

#### ***4.2.4 Strengthened autonomy and effective internal management:***

The state government's policy of better managing free services, including free water and power, had its impact on city agencies. While the water board systematically reduced the number of public stand posts and encouraged direct home connections and group connections, the electricity company vigorously enforced penal action on defaulters. This emphasis on revenue served to improve cash flows in these agencies, and helped expand services across the city.

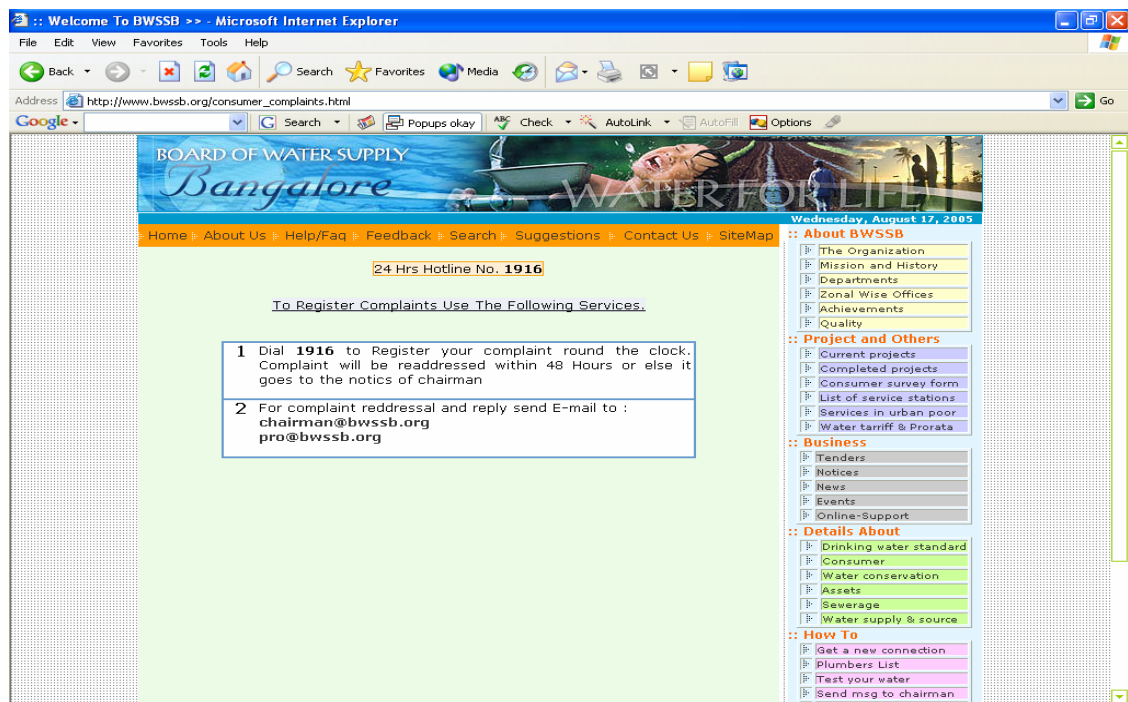
Technology came to play a big role in making improvements. While IT helped to improve the reliability of billing and monitoring revenue collection, fund based accounting served to improve cash management and tracking of liabilities. The use of mobile transformers to address local power outages, powered tools to clear blocked sewage lines and compactors to reduce volume of solid waste to be cleared, have all contributed to improve service delivery in the city. The experiences from well managed corporate houses percolated into these service agencies.

Improved discipline at work seems to have received substantial attention from the highest level of management. Attendance monitored through swipe cards, verification of completion of garbage clearance and immediate response to instances of alleged corruption have been reported by various agencies. The number of persons who faced disciplinary action for corruption in the BWSSB is testimony to this harder approach. While these do not speak of total compliance by all parts of the organization, they are indicative of firm steps and commitment in these agencies.

As part of the commitment to improve services, the state government encouraged service agencies to prepare citizen charters. While many of these charters served to inform users about the agency and its services, some also moved towards defining service standards. The most important steps were taken in the case of the electricity distribution companies, which were operating under the directions of the Electricity Regulatory Commission. The

distribution companies were called upon to follow a clear set of service standards, and to report on the extent of non-compliance. The Water Board also had a strong system for internal monitoring of service breakdowns and complaints, with the reporting escalating to higher levels, including the Chairman, in case of delay in redressal.

BWSSB's 24 hours hotline and interactive website are widely seen as potent tools to combat corruption



#### 4.2.5 Role of the Lok Ayukta (State Ombudsman)

The Karnataka state ombudsman (*lok ayukta*) played an indirect role in enhancing accountability in the agencies. This official has powers not only to investigate grievances from the public about public agencies but also to initiate investigations into agency operations. The ombudsman appointed in 2000 was active on both fronts. His raids on offices and subsequent actions to penalize public officials guilty of corruption produced much adverse publicity for many agencies and departments of the state government. His integrity and courage were lauded by civil society, the media, and political leaders. Many observers believe that these actions also had a deterrent effect, even on agencies that were not investigated by the ombudsman. Strong support from the chief minister was a major factor that made it possible for the ombudsman to function fearlessly. While BATF provided positive impetus for public agencies to perform better, political support for the ombudsman sent the agencies a warning that corruption and sloth would not be tolerated. These two approaches were thus mutually reinforcing.

## 5. Summary & Lessons Learned

1. There is much that service providers and their supervising authorities can learn about the quality and adequacy of their services by listening to user feedback. Citizen report cards offer a valuable tool to gather such feedback. It is the diagnostic information

provided by report cards that separates this tool from the protests and complaints by the people against public agencies. When government's own monitoring is incomplete or weak, report cards tend to fill this gap and act as a useful aid to policy makers and managers. In many sense, it has come to play the role of a "proxy" regulator.

2. The relevance of this tool for the poor cannot be overemphasized. It is difficult and costly for poor people to make their voice heard in powerful and large public agencies. Often their voice may not be correctly represented by their leaders or even mediating organizations. The survey methods used by report cards permit the poor to make their voice heard directly and with minimal bias. Report card findings can empower the poor by giving them information that they can use in their interactions with service providers.
3. When a government and its service providers are non-responsive or perform poorly, the only option left is for civil society to demand greater accountability. Report cards in conjunction with advocacy can then become a tool for civil society to stimulate government and its service providers to respond to the systemic problems being experienced by the people. The Bangalore report cards and other examples given in this case study show how this has been accomplished. Report cards work only from the demand side and hence there is no guarantee that such positive impacts will occur in every case. The diagnostic value of this tool to agency leaders and the glare effect it can cause may persuade them to become more responsive to the people.
4. Systemic and deep rooted issues like corruption cannot be tackled on a single point agenda. As the Bangalore experience shows, tackling corruption requires complementary interventions on staff training, easing interactions, publicizing standards and norms, creative use of technology and making service delivery processes more inclusive.
5. Though a report card on public services can be conducted as a technical exercise, the dissemination and advocacy work to follow will benefit a great deal if concerned civil society institutions are involved in the process from the start. Citizen groups and other civic associations, NGOs and the media can play a useful role both in supporting the initiative and taking it forward through advocacy and dialogue. In Bangalore, consultations with NGOs working with the poor helped sharpen the survey's focus on their problems. Public-private partnerships can be an effective vehicle for catalyzing reform and improving services, once the government takes a positive stance in favour of change.
6. Some pre-conditions need to be in place to ensure the acceptability of report cards. The credibility of those who use the tool and engage in advocacy is extremely important. The exercise should be seen as impartial and independent. The conduct of the survey and the interpretation of its findings should be done with utmost integrity. In general, competent and professionally managed organizations need to act as intermediaries for this to happen. These conditions apply irrespective of whether the initiative comes from civil society or the government.
7. Report cards are likely to be used by civil society groups in relatively open and democratic societies that respect dissent. This is not to say that non-democratic settings cannot benefit from this tool. But its proper use is unlikely to happen unless there is strong interest on the part of the political leadership to listen to public feedback and use the findings to improve public services or other aspects of governance.