



The Role of Social Accountability in Effective Public Service Delivery

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ABSTRACT

The paper highlights that in low and middle-income democracies citizens largely depend on the state for provisions of basic services like health, infrastructure, education etc. At the same time, it has been observed that such countries face problems of dismissal performance of service delivery due to absenteeism among service providers like doctors, teacher etc. There are also other factors like public fund leakages, red-tapism that obstructs public service delivery. All this has led to an idea of citizens contributing to better public service delivery by holding policymakers and service providers accountable. This phenomenon is where citizens ensure accountability of service providers. The paper highlights various social accountability tools like citizens charters, RTI, Right to Service Acts, Social Audit, Public Hearing etc. that aim to inform citizens about their rights, the standard of service delivery they should expect and actual performance, along with grievance redressal mechanism. NGOs, civic societies have been experimenting with various social accountability tools to improve public service delivery. The paper reviews how citizens individually and collectively can influence service delivery through access to information and opportunities to use it to hold providers both frontline service providers and programme managers accountable. The paper focuses on social accountability measures that increase transparency in public services. The paper also takes stock of international evidence and analyses how social accountability has changed the governance structure worldwide. The paper concludes by highlighting measures needed to strengthen social accountability to bring about a vibrant and effective public service delivery system. Paper also talks about that there is ample space for future experiments to test how to make social accountability work at the country level.

Keywords: Accountability, Governance, Public services, Social audit transparency

INTRODUCTION

Public Services are services which are provided by governments and their agencies within their jurisdiction. The basic essence of Public services is that there are certain services which should

be available to all irrespective of income, social status, physical ability or mental ability. Importance of Public service is greater in a modern democratic welfare state like India. Citizens in the country like India largely depend on the state for the provision of basic services, this is due to the absence of a strong market, and also there is deprived section of the society who can't access basic services in absence of state intervention. Public Administration which is a tool of implementing state policy plays an important role in a welfare state like India. Highlighting the significance of Public Administration in providing public services, W.B. Donhan, has rightly said: "If a civilization fails, it will be mainly because of the breakdown of administration." Laxmikanth (2012).

Some of the important sectors of public services are education, health, basic amenities, transportation, urban planning, waste management etc. But mere highlighting Public service doesn't serve the purposefully. The fundamental essence of Public services should be that they should be accessible to the targeted group. In the absence of Public service being delivered to the citizens, the whole concept of public service sounds hollow. Thus public service delivery is the most significant aspect of the modern welfare state. Better public service delivery promotes inclusive growth. India is committed to sustainable development goals can't afford to weaken the public service delivery mechanisms. Delivery of public goods and services is one basic responsibility of a state. Though due to the expansion of market many services are provided by the private sector, still some core services are provided by state only, like regulatory services, maintaining law & order, administration of justice, availability of essential goods etc. State through various agencies and mechanism provides goods & services to the citizens. Governments around the world have made Public service available through laws, act, the introduction of outcome budget, promotion of public-private partnership in public service delivery.

If we take public service in sectors of health and education, there are about 722 district hospitals, 4833 CHCs, 24049 Primary Health Centres and 148366 Sub centres in the country. In the education sector, India has 799 universities among them 49 central universities, 402 state universities are the major provider of public services. Thus from the above fact, we can conclude that state is the major provider of public service especially in a democratic country like India. Thus bureaucracy plays an important role in public service delivery. Its role has increased concerning the public services and at the same time, its powers have increased substantially. Many of the studies have shown that bureaucracy has failed to transform itself by developing the right attitude and responsiveness towards citizens. Effective public service delivery has suffered from Red-tapism, abuse of power, institutional corruption, leakage of funds, etc. It would not be wrong to say that bureaucracy as an important tool to implement government policies has failed in many aspects of governance. As rightly said by Philip Selznick "Bureaucrat becomes increasingly preoccupied with his social position and in the end, subverts the professed goals of the organisation by concentrating only on his power position." Laxmikanth (2012).

Thus it can be seen how bureaucracy becomes a hurdle ineffective public service delivery. Apart from the inability of bureaucracy to provide services, there are some other reasons also for lack of quality public service delivery. There have been numerous studies conducted to review public service delivery system across the world. The studies conducted by the NGOs, World Bank Group, Government Appointed Committees, think tanks, have highlighted various bottlenecks in public service delivery. Some of the issues are lack of awareness among citizens about the services, lack of infrastructure, poor internet connection, poor work culture, lack of stringent provision against a public official in case of failure to provide services.

Thus to highlight the failure of public service delivery case studies regarding education & health sector is very important as they are the sectors of very basic and essential service, where there is a greater interface between citizens and administration. Failure in these sectors reflects the seriousness of the issue. Despite increased budgetary allocation for education, implementation of the right to education acts, and schemes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the state of school education is very poor.

According to the annual status of education report 2018, released by Pratham, learning outcome among children are poor (ASER Centre, 2019). Class III find it difficult to read class II level. Similarly, class V students enable to read class II text. The report shows that only 50% of children enrolled in Standard V can read at least a standard II level text. Another important issue is the absenteeism among teachers. Health sector faces the same problem. Despite increased budgetary allocation, public health care delivery services have not achieved the desired outcomes. Absenteeism among doctors and health care staff, poor clinical care, lack of infrastructure, lack of trained staff, rampant corruption in health sectors are some issues. Similarly, there are other sectors which suffer from poor service delivery.

SOME GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

In the current scenario, there are talks about good governance, smart government and various other effective governance models. But in the absence of better & smooth public service delivery these ideas, models have no relevance. But it would be wrong to assume that governments have not done anything to improve public service delivery. Going through the experiences among citizens about lack of trust among citizens towards administration, governance failure at all level of administration. Government of India in 1996, initiated a chief secretary's conference. The purpose was to formulate an agenda for effective and responsive administration consequently many initiatives were introduced to bring about important changes in public service delivery. Some important steps were citizens charters, right to service act, application of information

communication & technology in governance i.e. e-governance. Many states enacted their right to service acts. First among those was Madhya Pradesh. Rajasthan guaranteed delivery of public service act 2011 provides 153 services of 18 departments in the time-bound manner (Ringold *et al.*, 2011). One important feature of the act is that there is also a penal provision for an official who fails to provide services in the time-bound manner as prescribed in the Act. Rajasthan even is the first state in the country to implement the Right to Hearing Act that aims at time-bound hearing and disposal of complaints related to Public Governance.

Government has also implemented Sevottam Model for Public service delivery as proposed by 2nd administrative reform commission (2017, December 2). It is regarded as a standard model to provide better public services in citizens' centric governance. This model provides a framework for the government department to assess and improve the quality of service delivery to citizens. Sevottam Model framework has 3 models, they are citizens' charter, public grievance mechanism & service delivery capability. Thus from the above discussions, it can be concluded that there have been numerous steps taken by the central & state government concerning public service delivery. But going through the experiences it has been highlighted that the government has failed to achieve the desired outcomes.

Charter initiative was ineffective, a survey was conducted in this context which was sponsored by second Administrative Reform commission in 2008 highlighted that 41% of charters under consideration did not indicate any timeframe for redressal of public grievances (IIPA, 2008). Similarly Right to service acts suffered from lack of awareness among citizens about the act, no provision to enforce qualitative services, & also a shortage of manpower. All these factors have exposed the government's failure to provide public services & good governance to its citizens. This has initiated a debate that what else can be done to reform the public services ecosystem.

THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

State's failure to provide better public service to its citizens has heralded the emergence of Phenomena known as "social accountability". Social Accountability is defined as "institutionalization of durable social control over policies, over their implementation by the provider." Jayal (2007) The essence of social accountability is the role of citizens in better public service delivery by holding service provider accountable. Thus social accountability can be defined as the citizens' action to hold public official, politicians and service providers accountable concerning delivery services. Social accountability is the mechanism of engagement of civic organisations to enforce service provider's accountability to improve service quality. Even the state has recognised the importance of social accountability in enhancing democratic governance and improving public

service delivery. Social accountability mechanism represents a sign of vibrant democracy where citizens are aware of their rights and claims. Importance of social accountability is greater in a developing country like India which is a vast country in term of size and population where there is poverty, illiteracy, inequality. Social accountability is enforced through various practices. These are called social accountability tools. There are a variety of tools that are being used all over the world. These tools have different focuses. Some are aimed at ensuring citizens participation in decision making, some tools targeting institutional corruption and enforcing transparency in governance. Some tools focus on creating an enabling environment for citizens' centric administration and strengthening capacity building of the citizens. Social accountability tools have different concerns and focus at a different level in the service delivery chain. Some tools create awareness about the services being delivered, some aimed at monitoring the implementation of service public service delivery mechanism and monitor the outcomes. Though different tools have different focuses, but there some prerequisites for these social accountability tools to be effective. They are as follows:

Generating Information

For the civic organisation to effectively enforce social accountability it is important to have access to regular, relevant & reliable information about the services being provided, about the quality levels that are being observed. In the presence of information, the control becomes effective. State here can play an important role in disclosing or disseminating information which can be accessible to all citizens in a simple way. Various tools like citizens charters, Right to Information act, community radio, mass media campaign can be employed to generate information about the services, schemes that are formulated by the government. That would make the citizens participation in exacting accountability from administration robust and impactful.

Grievance Redressal

It is another precondition for social accountability to be effective. Grievances redressal mechanism is necessary so that the citizens have the trust in the state that whatever the wrongdoing, corrupt practices, and inappropriate action of the administration is exposed through social accountability, it must be followed by punitive action by the state. Thus grievance redressal mechanism is at the core of social accountability mechanism, the state should provide for grievance redressal apparatus either online or through any other medium (Joshi, 2007).

Different social accountability tools are being adopted by civic organisations. But it is rightly observed that these tools are not universal, that is not all tools can fit into all situations. Usage of

tools depends on context, level of service delivery, kind of services being provided etc. But still, some important social accountability tools are social audit, citizens' report cards, and public expenditure tracking surveys, right to information etc. These tools have been effectively employed all over the country to improve public service delivery system. To be specific participatory budgeting is very prominent in Gujrat. Citizens' report cards are popular in Bangalore and Maharashtra. Similarly, citizens' charters are very much in use state of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Participatory expenditure tracking survey is widely prevalent in Rajasthan. Some of these practices are also popular globally. Citizens' report cards are popular in Ukraine, participatory expenditure tracking survey is in usage in Uganda. Thus we can see that social accountability is a global phenomenon particularly popular in developing and under-developed countries.

Before going into the impact of social accountability on governance and public service delivery system; it is vital to know about the social accountability tools simply and lucidly. Some of the important social accountability tools are:-

- **Citizens Charter:-** It is a document containing the services which the citizens are entitled to receive. It also contains the standards which the citizens are expected experience in term of services.
- **Social Audit:-** It is a critical examination of any government programme or scheme by primary stakeholder. Aim of social audit is to compare ground realities with official records.
- **Right to Information:-** It implies the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas. Arora and Goyal (2013)
- **Public Hearing:-** It is platform inhere official and citizens have the opportunity to exchange information on any projects or scheme.
- **Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys (PETS):-** It is a system where civic organisation or citizens groups track public resources from origin to the destination. It is a very effective tool to detect inefficiency and corruption.
- **Participatory Budgeting:-** It is the process by which citizens participates in budget formulation and also monitor its execution. It provides the opportunity for the citizens to formulate the budget according to their priorities.

After going through the details about the concept of social accountability, various tools, their meaning it is imperative to know about what changes that this phenomenon has brought in the domain of governance. Did it meet the desired outcomes or still their issues which are needed to be addressed.

IMPACT OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Working of the social accountability tools have contributed to better governance. It has empowered citizens. The improved effectiveness of the various scheme is the sign of the viability of social accountability in governance. Social accountability has created a partnership between local people, elected representative and officials. It has bridged the gap between them. Social accountability has able to identify local need & thus contributed to the formulation of plans in the context of local needs. PETS has able to identify misappropriation of public funds. PETS (Public Expenditure Tracking Survey) has also ensured optimum utilisation of resources. The social audit has become an important tool in identifying leakages in scheme implementation. Public hearings have become a very vibrant and effective platform where citizens, local communities express their opinions, issues, complaints. The social audit has streamlined administrative processes. Implementation of programmes like MGNREGA, National Rural Health Mission etc. have become much more smooth, effective with the coming up of social audit. Meghalaya became the first state to make social audit as a part of government practice. This shows the necessity and effectiveness of the social accountability tools that even governments are institutionalising social accountability to improve governance.

Some social accountability tools like citizens' report card have also been effective. It has highlighted the accountability issue by engaging media and policymakers. Citizens' report card is a very simple tool to record toe feedback of the citizens regarding the quality of services provided. Thus accountability is ensured on part of policymakers and service providers. It is evident from various studies and experiences that social accountability is a revolution in the public service reform process. Social accountability has fostered transparency and openness in public service delivery mechanism. It has not only streamlined the service delivery, but it has also raised the quality of services being provided.

But it would be unfair to say that social accountability is a perfect mechanism that is operating well without any loopholes. Still, some gaps are required to be addressed to make the social accountability and its tools a robust and impactful process. As it is evident that people resist change, and exercise of social accountability has changed the relationship between citizens and officials, vested interest groups resist change. Here local bureaucracy doesn't cooperate to provide relevant information. The information which is needed to conduct a social audit is not shared by the local bureaucracy. Sometimes the citizens themselves don't cooperate in carrying out social accountability practices due to the community and political pressure. Citizens involved in social accountability efforts are even threatened by powerful people who are benefitted by corrupt practices. There have been many incidents of attacks on Right to Information Act activists

and Social Audit activists. There has been a huge backlog of cases at the level of Central and State information commissioners. Arora and Goyal (2013) This hampers the working of social accountability and also discourages another citizen to participate in social accountability efforts. The lack of participation of the citizens in social accountability efforts will ultimately undermine the efficiency of social accountability efforts.

Lack of support by the bureaucracy to the social accountability initiative and the absence of an effective grievance redressal mechanism is yet another factor that poses a challenge to social accountability efforts. The spirit of social accountability is based on the corrective action taken up by the administration against any fraudulent practice in public service delivery. Thus grievance redressal mechanism is of utmost importance for social accountability to work well. There are some other issues also that affects the working of social accountability tools. Taking the example of Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys, it requires high-quality financial data, trained experts to carry out surveys, which is sometimes not available. Similarly, Social Audit is hampered by lack of funds, & technical expertise for interpreting the information gathered through audit.

These are some of the issues faced by social accountability. So it is evident that these challenges create obstacle in the working of social accountability but this should not stop citizens, civic organisations to enforce social accountability initiative. It is a well-known fact that every policy, plan, the initiative is launched with a positive intention. There may be some challenges that come across in the working of any such initiative, but the rational thing is to rectify the mistakes, overcome the challenges and make the initiative a success. Social accountability efforts can be made more effective by the collaborative efforts of both state and citizens.

Citizens and civic organisations should create awareness about various social accountability tools. Community radio and campaigning can play an important role in this. Funds can be mobilised for the smooth working of social accountability tools. The government should also play its part in strengthening social accountability by making social accountability a mandatory provision in policy design. Thus providing a legal right to participate in social accountability process will enhance its effectiveness. A clear guideline and norms on what constitutes a social accountability practice will work in the much larger interest of the initiative.

Some structural and institutional reform is also needed. A robust grievance redressal mechanism is a must. The state should provide the required infrastructure to carry out social accountability initiative. A cadre of expert activists should be created to implement social accountability tools. One important step is to strengthen section 4 of the Right to Information Act. Section 4 mandates proactive disclosure of information. It has been found that government departments have been performing poorly on proactive disclosure of information. Voluntary disclosure by public authority

conduct section 4 of the act, have been scanty and scarce. Arora and Goyal (2013) This needs to be addressed because the information is at the core of social accountability initiative.

CONCLUSION

Public service delivery is a single most important factor for inclusive and socio-economic development of a democratic country like India, which is still on the path of development. State though provides services but sometimes desired outcomes are not attained. Here comes the role of social accountability, where citizens engage to ensure accountability of the administration and improve Public Service delivery. Role of social accountability is greater in a democratic country where the government is by the people and for the people. Thus social accountability is an important tool to sustain the true democracy, transparent administration and equitable society. It is an important step towards achieving sustainable development goals.

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