

### Case 3. Citizens Complaint System in Mumbai

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Mumbai's rapid population growth has posed significant pressures on its urban public services. The city, which has the largest slum population in India, suffers from a severe shortage in housing and infrastructure, poor water supply and sanitation, and an overall decline in economic activity. The Brihan-Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) is one of the public agencies responsible for the overall governance of municipal services. Through its many programs, BMC strives to improve and expand the coverage and quality of public services. Part of its strategic vision is to transform Mumbai into a world-class metropolis.

Building partnerships with civil society organizations is a key strategy of BMC to improve urban governance and service delivery. The Corporation partnered with PRAJA, an NGO committed to promote public accountability through greater citizen involvement. In 1999, PRAJA assisted BMC in the drafting of its Citizens Charter and in 2000, they set up a centralized complaint registration system as a mechanism to strengthen citizen voice. The system provided consumers a helpline that was available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Using standards set in the Citizens Charter, PRAJA conducted public audits of BMC's performance. These were held every six months to monitor changes in service quality and to exert public pressure on elected and administrative officials. The audit results over a two-year survey period showed limited public awareness of BMC's service obligations, dissatisfaction over poor handling of consumer grievances and inaccessible political representatives and resource allocations.

To address citizens' concerns regarding inadequate grievance handling, BMC launched the Online Complaint Monitoring System (OCMS) in 2003. Publicity was done through newspapers and mainstream media agencies to disseminate information about the new initiative and its innovative features. Citizen feedback and service-related complaints could be communicated through various means -- through phone calls, letters, petitions, faxes, the internet as well as personal visits. OCMS also provides the convenience of accessing information on the status of their complaints without personal follow-up calls or visits to BMC offices. Once the complaint is logged in the system, an internal referral system forwards the information to responsible offices. Unresolved issues and any unreasonable delays in response are elevated to the Deputy Municipal Commissioner and to higher authorities if warranted. On average, citizens log in an estimated 172 complaints per day. In 6 out of 10 reported complaints, the issues of public concern considered most important involved (1) unauthorized construction and regularization, (2) drainage problems, (3) commercial licenses, (4) solid waste management and (5) water supply.

The initiative has benefited from the support of champions within BMC and influential government officials. Media coverage, although confined to the English mainstream press, helped boost public information efforts. The Right to Information Act in Maharashtra

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enacted in 2003 provides the legislative mandate requiring state agencies to grant citizen access to public information.

Since OCMS implementation in 2003, PRAJA's audits showed general citizen satisfaction with BMC's complaint redressal system. Direct links between citizens and service providers have led to positive public perceptions overall. Strong public demand for better governance has been created. Higher-level agencies such as the judiciary, state and central government have also created pressures for local-level reforms.

### **Questions for participants:**

1. How was information accessed?
2. How was public opinion mobilized to strengthen citizen voice?
3. How did they use the power of the media?
4. What are the relevant lessons of experience?

Despite these positive developments, a number of problems have been noted that can pose risks of program failure, if not addressed with the right interventions. A study done in 2005 identified the following problems with the initiative:

- limited improvements in meeting service standards
- marginal change in performance and behavior of frontline providers
- weak enforceability due to the absence of credible performance incentives
- low public awareness and use of the service; limited to those with access to phone, fax or internet
- exclusion of marginalized slum communities from service coverage
- gap between consumer perceptions and BMC with respect to redressal status (resolved vs unresolved issues)
- lack of dialogue and inadequate consultation during design phase of OCMS
- limited involvement of political representatives and frontline operational staff
- pro-accountability measures met with strong resistance from politicized and powerful labor unions
- narrow audience reach as media targeted mostly the educated and middle-class.

The 2005 study further notes that "OCMS is likely to remain a feature of governance in Mumbai. For BMC, the reputational costs of exiting the program are high due to pressure from the broad citizenry for better governance."

Already, the initiative has been replicated in Chennai and Bangalore. It is gaining widespread support as a model of CSO-public agency partnership.

Source: Adapted from World Bank "Engaging Citizens to Improve Services", Water and Sanitation Program, South Asia (WSP-SA), May, 2007.