



Public Affairs Centre

AN OPPORTUNITY LOST

The government has yet again lost an opportunity to fundamentally reform itself says a new report released by the Public Affairs Centre.

The report, titled "India's Citizen's Charters: A Decade of Experience," critically analyzes one of the government's signature reform initiatives: the Citizen's Charter program.

Citizen's Charters

Initiated in 1997, the Citizen's Charter program requires government agencies to draft and publicly disseminate short, simple documents that outline service quality standards, grievance redress options, application procedures and contact details of key officials. In theory, such information should not only empower ordinary citizens to hold public agencies accountable, but also increase transparency. In addition, by explicitly defining quality standards, government agencies would be obliged to deliver service as per those standards or risk facing the wrath of their users. The question remains as to the efficacy of this program in practice. Has the Citizen's Charter initiative actually empowered end-users and improved accountability and transparency?

A Decade of Experience

To answer this question, the Public Affairs Centre (PAC), a Bangalore based NGO, reviewed over 600 Citizen's Charters from across In-

dia, assessed nearly 200 charters in detail to determine their quality and interviewed hundreds of ordinary users and government officials to gauge their experiences. And the results are not good.

Poor Design

According to the report, most Citizen's Charters are not designed well. When benchmarked against international design criteria, no charter was rated as "Very Good" and 32% were "Good". Just 56% outlined departmental service quality standards, critical information that allows end-users to hold agencies accountable when

service is unsatisfactory. Worse, fewer than 28% of the charters analyzed explained how users could apply for service or obtain documents.

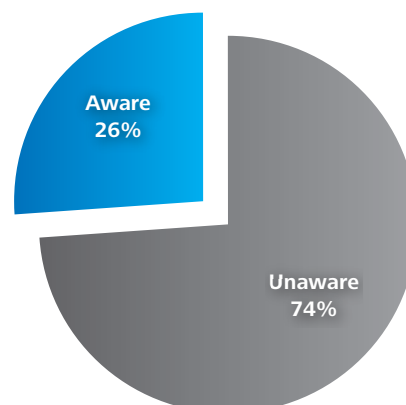
Targeting Those Who Need It?

Agencies that fall into the Environmental and Infrastructure sectors, which cater to the wealthy and educated, have the best quality Citizen's Charters while agencies in the Social Development sector, which primarily cater to the poor, have the worst quality charters.

Citizen's Charters? Never heard of it.

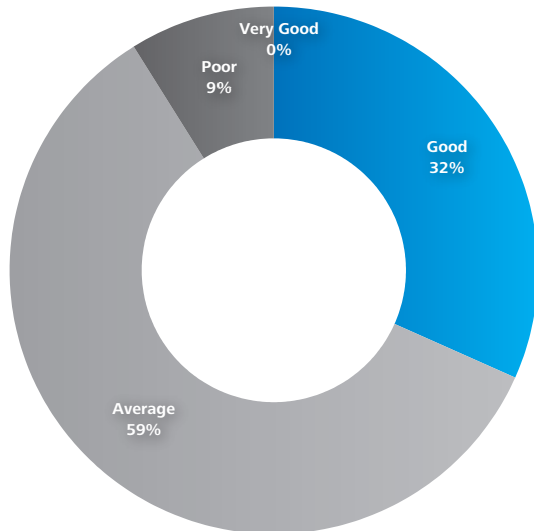
Few are aware of the Citizen's Charter program. Only 26% of end-users were aware that the Citizen's Charter program existed. In fact, just 8% had even seen and read a Citizen's Charter

Most end-users are not aware of the Citizen's Charter program
% of End-Users Surveyed



Most Charters are of Average to Poor Quality

% of Charters Reviewed Obtaining a Certain Grade



in a government office. Officials interviewed were just as clueless. Over 64% of officials interviewed were not trained in methods to implement Citizen's Charters.

Eastern & Northern States Lag

Access to Citizen's Charters in eastern states like West Bengal and northern states like Uttar Pradesh was fairly limited. Citizen's Charters from southern states like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu or Union Territories like Puducherry were the most accessible.

Neither Civil Society nor End-Users Consulted

Civil society organizations and ordinary citizens were rarely consulted when agencies were drafting Citizen's Charters. Surprisingly, officials were also excluded – just 37% of officials interviewed reported being involved when their agency was drafting a charter.

Few Improvements to Service Quality

Few agencies seem to live up to standards defined in their Citizen's Charter. Less than 40% of

end-users who were aware of the Citizen's Charter program reported that government agencies delivered service as per standards defined in a charter. By contrast, 89% of officials claimed that their agency delivered service as per standards. Almost 48% of end-users felt that the quality of service delivery by agencies that had implemented a Citizen's Charter was "Average" or "Poor".

A Lost Opportunity

Researchers say that the Citizen's Charter program has not met its potential. As Public Affairs Centre chairperson Samuel Paul noted, "Most government agencies seem to have viewed the Citizen's Charter program simply as an exercise in drafting a short document. It is much more. It is an opportunity for government agencies to fundamentally institute systemic changes to increase both accountability and transparency."

The Way Forward

Yet, Paul was optimistic. Evidence from the report suggests that agencies that do display Citizen's

Charters, and hence take this initiative seriously, provide better quality service and have more satisfied users. Citizen's Charters work. But for the Citizen's Charter program to become a success, Paul stressed that the drive for increased service quality and accountability must come as much from within the government as from outside. Lacking buy-in from insiders, the initiative is doomed to fail.

PAC researchers highlighted the need for the Citizen's Charter initiative to operate in a "mission mode," where agencies first build towards improving service to a certain level, then measure the improvement, and lastly draft a charter. PAC director Gopakumar Thampi further explained, "It's really chicken and egg. Public service providers need to first reform themselves to the point where they reliably deliver high quality service. Then, it makes sense to codify their progress in a Citizen's Charter. Right now, it seems that most agencies are simply drafting a charter without being able to live up to its promises."

The Public Affairs Centre's report concluded that many ordinary citizen are forced to use the RTI Act to obtain critical information when government agencies should have been proactively informing end-users through the Citizen's Charter program. "We're seeing that ordinary citizens have to file an RTI application, pay a fee, and then wait 30 days to resolve their problems with public service providers," Paul said. "It is to prevent this eventuality that the Citizen's Charter program was instituted in the first place! Now we have the worst of both worlds – a Citizen's Charter program that is poorly implemented,

and ordinary citizens who face the burden, both financially and emotionally, of using RTI to resolve their problems. The case for a more robust Citizen's Charter needs no further argument."

The Report's Release

Public Affairs Centre's report, "India's Citizen's Charters: A Decade of Experience," was released on Saturday, 7 July at the Hotel Atria in Bangalore. Luminaries attending included Veerappa Moily, former Chief Minister of Karnataka,

and A. Ravindra, former Chief Secretary of Karnataka. Project coordinator T. Sethumadhavan and PAC director Gopakumar Thampi presented the report's findings and policy implications. A brief discussion to elicit suggestions on improving the Citizen's Charter program followed.

Public Affairs Centre

Public Affairs Centre is a non-profit organization based in Bangalore that is dedicated to improving the

quality of governance in India. In this regard, the Public Affairs Centre focus is in areas where the public can play a proactive role in improving governance. Public Affairs Centre undertakes research into public policy, facilitates citizen action groups, and provides advisory services to state and non-state agencies. Public Affairs Centre can be contacted by telephone at **80.2783.4918** or by email at **mail@pacindia.org**. The organization's website is **www.pacindia.org**.