

Performance of Service Charters: Assessment of Their Values and Significance in an Indian Perspective

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Abstract

Citizens all over the world nowadays perceive the Governments as service providers rather than mere regulators. This perception has created growing expectations among citizens about how and in what manner their governments should serve them. To meet this perception and expectation of the citizens, various initiatives are being taken and implemented by the Government so that the quality of public service and the modalities of its delivery is viewed as convenient and acceptable by the citizens. Service Charter is a significant tool to ensure, monitor, and continuously improve public service delivery. This article has discussed the values of service charters which are fundamental for the performance of a service charter and ultimately meeting public expectation. The article then analyzed the performance of service charter in an Indian state called 'Karnataka' and demonstrated how the core values of services charters have been manifested in the public service delivery excellence in that state.

Keywords: service charter, citizen's charter, India, public service delivery

1. Introduction

Service charter is an outline for every transaction or business that takes place between the government and citizens. Citizens all over the world have become more aware of their rights and privileges through interconnectedness as a result of globalization. Now citizens want to know in advance what the government would provide them with and in what manner. Since the citizens get most of their goods and services from private organizations as customers, it made them think of the return in terms of cost, value, and time or convenience. Like private organizations, citizens expect the public sector to provide them with necessary services which would be effortless and cost-effective (McGuire 2001). Although service charter was originated in the United Kingdom in 1991 as Citizens Charter, it was all started centuries ago (in 1838) as People's Charter which was a document containing the

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rights of ordinary citizens submitted to the Parliament of England. The objectives of the citizens charter were to ensure public organizations' responsiveness, transparency, and accountability by improving the quality of public services. Attaining these objectives would eventually empower the citizen for becoming an important part of public service delivery.

Based on the original idea of the UK's citizens charter, many other countries implemented similar programmes in different names. For example, Australia implemented 'Service Charter' in 1997, Malaysia implemented the 'Client Charter' in 1993, Canada implemented 'Service Standards Initiatives' in 1995. All these programmes aimed at enhancing the quality of service offering and government liability. Since the beginning, service charters have been implemented under meticulous monitoring and evaluation to measure their performance and to make necessary improvisations to make it more effective and contextual. Adoption of service charter in many countries has experienced stiff controversy as to whether it is the right instrument to improve accountability and service delivery or only a generic solution recommended by some donor organizations which does not match diverse contexts. This essay examines the value of service charters (namely; Citizens' Charter) and if it had made a significant contribution for improving public service delivery and public accountability with reference to India.

2. Underlying Values of Service Charters

2.1 Trust

Service charters contain the values similar to the values we share in society as a human being. The first important value of a service charter is trust. Service charters develop trust between the government and citizens (Sharma & Agnihotri 2001) as it gives an idea of what service/s the citizens would get and how. Service charters are the commitment of the governments to its citizens for providing certain public services within the specified time and manner as deemed most appropriate. These voluntary commitments on the part of the government make the citizens rely more on the public sector.

2.2 Collaboration

The second value of the service charters is collaboration. Service charters encourage collaboration between government and citizens which is vital for improving public service delivery. Service charters in many nations are recommended by the United Nation Development Programme and according to its advice, service charters are designed by the experts in collaboration with front-line service providers (public servants) and users (the citizens) (James, Murphy & Reinhart 2005). Entwistle and Martin (2005) in their article mentioned the role of the market in public service delivery which encourages the government to go for the relationship between public

service providers and citizens for improving public service delivery. Collaboration opportunities in service charters create avenues for government organizations (public service providers) and citizens to share the responsibility with regards to public service delivery.

2.3 Respect

The third value of the service charters is respect. Every service charter highly emphasizes on the treatment of the citizens with due respect. It declares that citizens coming for getting service from public entity would be treated equally devoid of their caste, creed, and societal background. Service charters also give importance to paying due respect to the service provider (public servants) on the part of the citizens and public agencies. Because public servants also need to be respected in order to treat the citizens with respect (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000). This mutual respect is embedded in service charters which ensures the reception of the service receivers with care and their requirements are taken into prompt consideration and delivered with required services within the committed time and manner. As public administration works as a bridge between citizens and elected representatives, it needs to make sure that the relationship between government and citizens is centred around mutual respect (Verspaandonk 2001). Public administration uses service charter to keep up mutual respect to ensure good governance as a result of this strong relationship.

2.4 Shared Responsibility

Shared responsibility is another value of service charters which involves all parties, such as the government, public service providers (civil servants) and the citizens in every stage of its planning, formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Service charters express the requirements for getting public services from the respective public organization. This expression makes the citizens aware of their responsibility, such as the requirements to be fulfilled in advance, any fees to be paid, fulfilling any legal obligation and so on. Service charters encourage the government, public managers, and citizens to actively make their contributions for improving the quality of public service and designing a convenient distribution mechanism. Sharing responsibility by the government and citizens has been very effective in solving public issues nowadays. It clearly defines the responsibilities of the citizens in terms of service entitlement. Sharing responsibility develops a sense of ownership in the citizens and makes them an integral part of public service delivery.

2.5 Grievance Redressal

The fourth value of services charters is redressal of grievance and complaint management. This is one of the most critical values of service charters which helps

the service provider to respond to complaints raised by the citizens. It also enables the service provider to evaluate the tendency and nature of complaints in order to take effective measure to stop them from coming back frequently. Service charters mention the consequences of the failure by the service provider in delivering required public service as outlined in it. Grievance redressal system attached to service charter makes sure the voice of the citizens is heard and taken into consideration for explanation or compensation when they are not delivered required services. Service charters also develop a complaint lodgment mechanism and guide the citizens on how to make use of it because an easily accessible redress mechanism is more beneficial than the complex one (Gauri 2013).

3. Service Charters: empowering the citizens through transparency, accountability, and efficiency

Above mentioned values make service charter a significant tool to improve public service delivery. Service charters are particularly important because they treat the citizens as customers (Barron & Scott 1992). For some specific embedded attributes, the service charter has made itself one of the most important instruments for public management reform initiatives. First, transparency and accountability; service charters are formulated in consultation among all stakeholders. The service provider (public servants) and service recipients (the citizens) take part in an open and transparent service charter formulation approach to list down the service requirement of the citizens and determine what would be the vehicles for delivering those services. Through this process, citizens are informed in advance of the quality of service they would receive from the public service provider, how much the service would cost, and how long it would take to get it.

This transparency empowers the citizens to ask for compensation if the provides fail to provide required service duly. Second, enhancement of individual, and organizational efficiency. Service charters help governments to improvise the service delivery mechanism and enhance performance (Post & Agarwal 2012). Service charters hold service providers accountable for their efficiency in public service delivery. Every public service stipulated in service charter needs to be delivered within a specific time which eventually makes the service delivery process faster by improving the capacity of the civil servants and public organizations. Third, empowering citizens; Clifton, Comín and Díaz Fuentes (2005, p. 418) wrote:

A virtuous circle is created whereby tax-paying citizens are 'empowered' with more knowledge about the quality of public services and corresponding means to redress their grievances, while those who provide public services are offered incentives to improve performance, transparency and responsiveness to changing customer needs and expectations.

From this description, it is quite understandable the “virtuous circle” that the writers are referring to is created by none other than service charters. Service charters disclose all pertinent information about different public services. This information disclosure gives the citizen freedom of making an informed decision at the right time which is representative of their empowerment.

4. Significance of Service Charter (namely Citizen’s Charter): an Indian Perspective

In 1996, chief secretaries of all the states in India had participated in a conference titled “Effective and Responsive Administration”. This conference helped the government of India to realize the need for transforming the administration into more effective and responsive. With this background, in a conference of chief ministers of Indian states in 1997, the decision of formulating Citizen’s Charter at central and state-level governments was adopted for making the administration effective and responsive (Sharma & Agnihotri 2001). Initially, the charters clearly specified in it the standard of public service citizens would receive, the time required for service delivery, and how to get the grievance redressed just in case the service providers fail to meet the specifications of service delivery outlined in citizen’s charter.

Following this decision, state governments started designing and implementing a Citizen’s Charter in different names to bring about simplicity, transparency, and accountability in public service delivery. One of the most innovative citizen’s charters in India was launched by the Government of Karnataka called “Sakala” by enacting “Karnataka Guarantee of Services Act 2011”. Sakala means in-time. The first aim of Sakala is to deliver essential public services to the citizens in a timely manner as this is one of the most important elements of good governance. Sakala is a move towards administrative reform in Karnataka state to deliver the most essential public services on time with transparency and accountability with the help of information and communication technology (Rajneesh 2015). The principal aspiration of Sakala is to encourage the free and open interaction between the government and its organizations and citizens (Rajneesh 2013).

Since its inception, 265 mostly needed public services have been brought together under Sakala. Detailed information about these services and their providers is made accessible online for the citizens through which they can easily initiate a service request. Once the request is made, the applicant gets a unique guarantee of service to citizen (GSC) number. This number can be used to monitor the progress of the application online. If the requested service is not provided during the timeframe specified in Sakala, the applicant can raise the issue by calling the call-centre and claim compensation of India Rupee 20.00 per day of delay in delivering the service. This compensatory amount is deducted from the salary of the respective public servant found responsible for the delay.

By having this control mechanism, Sakala is ensuring 98% success in delivering timely and hassle-free public services. Sakala has so far served every single household in Karnataka. Service delivery process under Sakala is completely transparent and the providers are accountable for their responses to the applicants as the processing can be tracked in real-time. Citizens can easily get access to the services they need via Sakala help desks conveniently established all over the geographic boundary of Sakala. Sakala continuously seeks to improve service delivery by taking into consideration the feedback of 200 citizens per month.

Sakala has received several national and global awards for its commendable contribution for making public service delivery easy and citizen-centric and ensuring transparency and accountability for promoting good governance. In 2013 Sakala received Google Innovation award for successfully solving socio-economic challenges with the use of information and communication technology. It is also awarded the 2013-2014 National e-Governance award.

Any reform encounters many challenges to continue sustainably. For its sustainability, Sakala has developed a comprehensive online system which processes an application from its beginning through the disposal along with performance monitoring, and grievance redressal. It also attempted to reduce the interface between the citizens and civil servants which is sometimes believed to be a platform for malpractices. Sakala has connected its automated service delivery with payroll automation for the deduction of compensation from the civil servants responsible for slow service delivery. All these initiatives of Sakala are being replicated in other states in India to make their service charters truly a tool to exhibit public accountability, transparency, and good governance through better public service delivery.

Although some scholars argued that the service charters could not reach its goals to the extent these should have been. Equity and equality in service delivery are two of the principles of service charters, even then sometimes, majority of the people coming from the upper class of the societies take the most advantage of the charters, and this does create polarization in the society (Haque 2005). There is also a controversy about considering the citizens as the customers because consumer and citizens had two different perspectives in the public sector (Connolly, McKeown & Milligan-Byrne 1994). In most developing countries, service charters are experiencing a lack of public awareness of it. When people have very little or no knowledge of their rights and privileges, service charters suffer from offering its limited benefits.

5. Conclusion

The significance of service charters exceeds its limitations by many folds because, along with the assurance of transparent, and timely service delivery, service charters

also enhances the value of the citizens' life that paves the way to good governance. Public servant's accountability has been significantly increased after the implementation of Service charters, thereby it is being successfully used by public organizations as employee performance monitoring and evaluation tool. Service charters clearly set out the service delivery targets for public managers and help public organizations to assess the perception of the citizens regarding the service delivered (Ghobadian & Ashworth 1994). Service charters are the outcome of citizens participation which is one of the important elements of good governance. In its' every stage of development and implementation, service charters actively engage the target citizens for whom it is created and consider their preferences. Service charters continue to get improvised based on the feedback received from the stakeholders through a grievance redressal mechanism. Based on the literature reviews and arguments raised in this essay, it can be concluded by saying that, using service charters as an instrument for public sector reform have been significantly important and therefore, these are not just a few pieces of paper of service specifications hanging outside public offices, but an assurance of public expectations (Kouzmin et al. 1999).

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