Service delivery government

A guide to best practice in transparency, accountability and civic engagement across the public sector

Service delivery

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The delivery of effective education, health and water services is essential to human well-being and spurring economic growth. Governments have expanded investments in these services in recent years, and in many countries today typically one-third of public monies are spent on education, health and water. For citizens, the use of these services provides the most common interface with their governments and the most tangible manifestation of the state–citizen compact, and this experience shapes their sense of trust in and expectations of government.

However, in practice, the value and reliability of basic services are often very poor. Massive investments have not led to achievement of outcomes. Many people, particularly the poor, are forced to fend for themselves as schools go without adequate books, teachers and learning, dispensaries lack medical supplies and trained personnel, and water points cease to function or cost too much. Large disparities among populations persist, further eroding the social fabric and undermining popular aspirations. In the face of these difficulties, local governance and oversight mechanisms tend not to function well, leaving citizens without practical recourse to remedy. Promoting greater transparency and imaginative opportunities for citizen engagement may help trigger better use of public funds, greater responsiveness and improved service delivery.

Initial steps

Goal

Governments make key information on basic service delivery policies, entitlements, budgets and performance meaningfully accessible to all people.

Justification

Most citizens do not know what their basic entitlements and responsibilities are, or the expected performance of service providers, and are therefore unable to follow up, assess value or play their roles effectively. The lack of information also makes it easier for unscrupulous local officials and service providers to divert public resources for illicit gain.

Recommendations

1. Governments should make public citizen entitlements/responsibilities, funds released and actual performance levels related to education, health and water (and any other basic services). The commitment should be specific: e.g. 'At least 80% of all citizens will be easily able to access this information'.

2. The information should be disaggregated to the lowest level (e.g. 'x and y services are free for pregnant women, z dollars per student will be sent to each school per student, x out of y students passed the examinations, there are x water points in your ward per population, and y of them are functioning,' etc.) and presented in a user-friendly (visual) manner so as to be relevant and meaningful to ordinary people.

3. The 'retail' popularisation of information can often be best done by professional communication companies or civil society organisations (CSOs); therefore governments should make such information (in raw data) available to these third parties and foster its dissemination to the lowest levels, including through radio, TV, internet (e.g. Facebook) and mobile phone platforms.

4. Governments should commit to post information on public noticeboards at all public schools, dispensaries, water points, libraries and local government offices.

5. Governments should foster easy feedback mechanisms and provide cooperation to independent monitoring efforts that seek to assess the reach and quality (meaningfulness, value) of the public dissemination of information, and should commit to specify and take swift measures to remedy problems.

Country examples

Capitation grant disbursements have been made episodically in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. Some countries have created client service charters, but these need to be compiled at the citizen level, rather than for central ministries.

More substantial steps

Goal

Governments make key information on the execution of policies, attainment of results and independent audits meaningfully accessible to all people, and in a manner that allows comparisons.

Justification

In many countries, the key challenge is not the need for better policies, but implementation of existing policies and the translation of funding and inputs into meaningful results. Particular emphasis should be placed on two aspects – procurement and achievement of outcomes – because these areas tend to be rife with problems and/or tend to be neglected, and can often enable tangible citizen engagement. In the information they provide, governments should explicitly disseminate and enable comparisons of different sorts (actual vs. policy; this year vs. previous years, our school vs. other schools, the average monthly salary of a health worker vs. monthly expenditures on travel allowances), because it is in comparing that data achieves meaning. Comparisons also allow citizens (and authorities) to more effectively compare performance, assess value for money and exercise choice and accountability.

Recommendations

1. Governments should commit to tracking and making publicly accessible a specific set of (quantitative and qualitative) measures to assess execution of policies and attainment of progress.

2. The underlying data used to assess progress should be made publicly available, in formats that can be easily crunched by third parties. Information should be provided to the lowest disaggregated facility or community level (e.g. school, health facility, village) and to unit prices (per textbook, per water well constructed), so as to be meaningful and relevant to citizens.

3. The information should be available on user-friendly interactive online platforms that allow users to tailor searches and queries, and in particular to make comparisons across time, geographies, sectors and against policy commitments. In particular, information from different sources should be presented side by side (e.g. administrative data, survey data, reports of the auditor general, reports of the public procurement authorities).

4. Because computer-based internet access, while growing, is still constrained in developing countries, explicit efforts should be made to make information available on public noticeboards and on popular mobile phone platforms and to foster synergies with other mass media (e.g. FM radio) and mass institutions (e.g. faith bodies, fast-moving consumer goods companies).

5. Governments should foster easy feedback mechanisms and provide cooperation to truly independent monitoring efforts that seek to assess execution of public services and quantity/quality of attainment, and should commit to specify and take swift measures to remedy problems. While ad hoc monitoring as need arises can be helpful, establishing systematic monitoring mechanisms that monitor what is happening at the lowest levels, and involving impartial academics and CSOs who produce credible 'report cards' to the nation, would be more valuable. Because the quality/integrity of underlying data used by governments can be uneven, independent monitoring should also assess the reliability of data used.

Country examples

Initiatives include Education Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys (PETS) in Uganda and Tanzania, medical stock-outs (Ushahidi, Huduma) in Kenya, data searchable to facility level (UBOS, Uganda), popularising audit reports (various), Data. gov (US, UK) and right to information/government documents surrounding essential services to a very detailed level (Sweden).

Most ambitious steps

Goal

Governments foster wide civil society and direct citizen participation in information sharing, problem solving, innovation and practical accountability so as to improve service delivery.

Justification

The constituency most affected by and often most knowledgeable about the realities, constraints and opportunities regarding service delivery are the millions of citizens and grounded CSOs (including local faith and business groupings), and yet this constituency is often the least consulted or involved in solving persistent service delivery challenges. Creating serious and practical opportunities for citizen involvement may provide a huge untapped reservoir of knowledge and good will, align incentives effectively and create greater trust, all of which are essential to solve service delivery challenges. New technologies and decreasing costs of communication, particularly the mobile phone and fast-growing social media platforms such as Facebook, enable unprecedented avenues for information sharing and demand-driven, contingent collaboration.

Recommendations

1. Governments should establish a set of clear principles, regulations and tools to foster an enabling open environment for the engagement of multiple state and independent actors (including individual citizens) to provide feedback and ideas.

    a. The key here is not only to establish a defined set of activities that are managed or coordinated by government, but rather to set the conditions in which interested parties can access and generate information and ideas easily, undertake their own analyses and communication, innovate new tools (for example, apps) and help catalyse an exciting 'ecosystem' of ideas and actions.

    b. The role of governments should be to support third party (or autonomous government) bodies to facilitate such an environment, to encourage easier exchange and critique, to take feedback seriously and respond to it reliably, and to set incentives right within government to tap into new ideas, experiment and rigorously evaluate and adopt them at scale.

2. Funding and awards can be set up to spur innovations and problem solving, and in a manner that allows comparison and rewards those in government who exercise bold leadership.

3. Feedback mechanisms should be set up that are built around what people already use and like (e.g. mobile phones, markets, prayer groups, schools) and multiple opportunities should be provided so as to cater for different tastes and to mitigate against some channels not working.

    a. A critical element of this approach is not only providing data, but documenting and telling (and challenging) stories (or enabling people to tell their stories) of how they have brought about change.

Country examples

Daraja (Tanzania), Huduma (Kenya), social audits, checkmyschool (India, Philippines, etc.), Friends of Education, Apps for Africa, MakerFaire, wananchi.go.tz and numerous developed country examples such as seeclickfix.com or open311.com.