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Give voice to community within a community

📅 On 17 Aug, 2018 👤 By Meena Nair, Annapoorna Ravichander

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Knowledge stems from citizens as a legitimate source of evidence to inform policies; exactly the reason why governments should capitalize on this knowledge. This is where think tanks can operate as mediators between government and citizens to harness and disseminate collective knowledge.

To be able to give voice to a community and to enable them to demand their rights and entitlements, it is critical that their voices or experiences are collected to mirror their daily battles with various public or government services. In most developing countries, governments are monopolistic institutions that continue to provide critical services not taking into account the experiences of their users. Though there are many government agencies that have mechanisms to gather feedback from users on their services, there is still a lot of room for improvement. that would help address the immediate need for both sides to understand each other's' constraints and expectations.

However, generating and synthesizing this type of knowledge to inform policymaking is a true challenge for many government bodies. Think tanks can play a valuable role helping bridge this gap by collecting voices through systematic application of Social Accountability Tools (SATs) that uses indicators reflecting the three pillars of good governance – transparency, accountability and participation.

Public Affairs Centre (PAC), an independent Think Tank located in Bengaluru, India, has pioneered and applied several of these tools. PAC has been working towards improving public governance in India for the past 24 years. PAC believes in an evidence-based research-advocacy-action approach to ensure inclusiveness of populations and geographies in the development trajectory.

 Courtesy of Community Eye Health under CC at flickr.com

Indeed, the story of PAC begins with the instrument that led to the establishment of the institution. The first SAT that was pioneered by PAC was the Citizen Report Card (CRC): it was implemented as a small experiment among the users of various public services (8 services that included municipal services, water supply, electricity, telephones, banking and hospital services) in Bengaluru primarily to analyse issues that they face with the relevant government agencies.

The CRC is a survey-based user feedback mechanism that systematically collects information from users on various aspects of a service. These include – access (for e.g. distance to a health unit), adequacy (for e.g. availability of medicines, equipment, lab facilities in a health unit), quality (for e.g. waiting period for a doctor, behavior of doctor and other staff in a health unit), problem incidence and resolution (for e.g. nature of problem, grievance redress mechanism, responsiveness of staff in a health unit), corruption (for e.g. payment of extra money, lack of receipt against the payment), satisfaction and suggestions for improvement. CRCs are basically diagnostic tools that help understand the breadth and depth of the problems faced by the users. This feedback mechanism helps users demand better services and policy makers to fine-tune policies on the basis of this evidence. For example, the Municipal Corporations in Rajkot and Bengaluru cities began to explore avenues to adapt modest steps to subcontract some services to private sectors to reduce power crisis. As a result, a firm in Kolkata has taken up the distribution of electricity.

This caught the attention of some of the government departments leading to the creation of PAC. Since then, PAC has moved on to apply the tool across various sectors, geographies and populations in India.

Building on the first experience, PAC innovated other SATs, one of which that is currently used almost at par with CRCs – the Community Score Card (CSC) approach. This is a mixed-method tool that uses the rigour of numbers to score the performance of indicators to assess quality of service delivery by both communities of users and service providers. This coupled with the art of negotiation, has helped create platforms for constructive engagement between the two for joint decision making. PAC's continued use of this approach as an advocacy and action tool has helped giving voice to the 'voiceless' or vulnerable communities within a community to firstly understand their entitlements, and secondly demand the same from service providers.

As a signatory to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), India is committed to achieving the targets therein. In this endeavor PAC works at the last mile and believes that only the creation of an Awareness->Advocacy->Action approach can lead to 'Leave No One Behind', the mandate of SDG. Sustainable Development Goals.

Information on steps towards implementation of these SATs are available in the PAC website www.pacindia.org

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