



Citizens Charter as a Social Accountability Tool: The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations

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I. Introduction

The most fundamental constitutional pledge of the state of Bangladesh is to *put people first* in the way the state is to be governed.² It is about democracy and democratic governance that lies behind the pledge to create the institutional, legal and political space to hold the government accountable to the people.

In the forty years since independence in 1971 in the wake of a massive political upsurge for self-determination, democracy, justice and equality of all that culminated into a bloody liberation war costing 3 million lives, Bangladesh has achieved commendable progress in terms of several socio-economic indicators. It has maintained a steady economic growth in the range of 5-6 % since 1990s. Even against the backdrop of the global financial crisis when most countries struggled to achieve positive growth, Bangladesh maintained GDP growth at nearly 6 percent³. The country's Human Development Index rating has increased from 0.365 in 1980 to 0.566 in 2011⁴; in terms of the Multidimensional Poverty Indicator (MPI), Bangladesh with 26.2 percent of the population in severe poverty has been ranked in 2011 ahead of Pakistan, India and Nepal⁵; population growth rate has come down from 2.5 percent per annum in 1980s

¹ Executive Director, Transparency International Bangladesh. This is a preliminary draft prepared to facilitate discussion at the session on “The Role of NGOs in Formulating and Implementing the Citizens Charter” during a conference on “Locally Relevant Citizens Charter” organized by the Civil Service Change Management Programme of the Ministry of Public Administration, held in Dhaka on January 18, 2012. The author is grateful to his colleagues Rezaul Karim, Santu Das and Kumar Bishwajit Das for their assistance.

² All powers in the Republic belong to the people, and their exercise on behalf of the people shall be effected only under, and by the authority of this Constitution. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*, Article 7 (1)

³ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, http://www.bbs.gov.bd/na_wing/GDP_2008_09.pdf

⁴ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2011*: http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2011_EN_Complete.pdf

⁵ The Multidimensional Poverty Index introduced by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative showed that in 2011 26.2 percent of the population in Bangladesh are in severe poverty, 27.4 percent in Pakistan, 28.6 percent in India and 37.1 in Nepal. <http://www.ophi.org.uk/policy/multidimensional-poverty-index/mpi-data-methodology/>

to 1.39 by 2010⁶; gross primary enrolment rose from 72% in 1980 to 93.5 percent in 2010⁷; child mortality has decreased from 239 per thousand live births in 1970 to 65 per 1000 in 2010⁸. Bangladesh's progress in achieving MDGs has been commended, including a UN Award for reducing child mortality.

Many more indicators of similar nature could be cited. Needless to say, all these have been possible thanks to efforts of the Government complemented by an expanding private sector and a vibrant non-government sector. However, it can be hardly disputed that Bangladesh's performance could have been much better if not for the persistent deficit in transparent and accountable governance and democratic institutionalization.

This paper presents a framework for discussion on the role of non-governmental organizations in developing and implementing the Citizens Charter, a non-conventional tool for accountable governance in service delivery in the public sector. It introduces a pilot initiative by Transparency International Bangladesh for formulating and implementing the Citizens Charter, a micro level social accountability process to promote participatory and accountable governance at the level of service delivery by a voluntary engagement of stakeholders. As a legally non-binding social contract, the Citizens Charter contributes to accountability and transparency in a process that involves a series of collective efforts which eventually lead to a public commitment by all stakeholders to promote governance quality and level of accountability to the people. Introduced by TIB in four local level institutions of public service delivery till date, the Citizens Charter has a built-in process of application, monitoring, grievance redressal and evaluation that may facilitate replication. The paper also highlights the key challenges of the instrument.

II. Conceptual Background & Rationale of the Citizens Charter

The degree of democratic and accountable governance depends on the collective strength of the national integrity system which is the sum-total of a set of institutions and practices. These are the Parliament including its oversight role on the Government, Judiciary, Executive, Auditor General, specialized watchdog bodies like the Anti-Corruption Commission and Ombudsman, the Election Commission, law-enforcing bodies, public service, civil society, media, private sector, etc.

⁶ Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, *Bangladesh Demographic Data Sheet*: http://www.indexmundi.com/bangladesh/population_growth_rate.html

⁷ Directorate of Primary Education, http://www.banbeis.gov.bd/webnew/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=342:gross-and-net-enrolment-rate-in-primary-education&catid=61:primary-education-2010&Itemid=180

⁸ Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, *Bangladesh Demographic Data Sheet*, <http://www.dgfp.gov.bd/data%20sheet.htm>

A hugely important prerequisite for this structure, or hardware to be effective is the software, namely, the democratic practice. Strengthening democratic governance, especially where conventional institutions and processes of accountability fail to deliver effectively, requires non-conventional tools of social accountability - voice and demand for change. Social accountability is about strengthening the demand side of good governance, to build capacities of the citizens to raise voice and demand for accountable, transparent and pro-people governance. It is also essentially a set of tools and processes for building effective bridges of the public officials and public representatives with citizens, a sense of collective ownership and responsibility. It is a non-conventional process of holding the power-holders accountable and responsive to the people on whose mandate they exercise the power.⁹

To complement the efforts and deliveries of the conventional institutions of accountability, there is a growing recognition of the need to innovate and adopt new tools and processes that reinforce the element of participation in democratic governance. In addition to being a government of the people, by the people and for the people, democracy needs to be a government *with* the people. This is particularly important in the public sector, especially service deliveries that are aimed to benefit the poor and the disadvantaged. Involving the people as stakeholders – in design, delivery, monitoring and assessment of the quality of services - can effectively reinforce and strengthen the conventional accountability systems. This approach to accountability requires taking the people as stakeholders rather than simple beneficiaries, service recipients or objects of development.

This participatory approach ensures higher degrees of accountability by using innovative tools and processes of accountability because those at the operational and receiving end are best placed to raise questions about any possible erosion of integrity in the process of delivering development and services. While much of the attention in the discourse on accountability is focused to the macro level like the elections, legislature including parliamentary oversight, judiciary, law enforcement, public auditing and other watchdog institutions and processes, much less attention has been given on the issue of accountability at the micro level with the benefit of stakeholder participation especially at the level of service delivery.

Macro level accountability creates the legal, institutional and organizational environment and strength needed for accountability. On the other hand micro level accountability, if effectively designed and implemented can significantly complement the macro efforts and reduce the burden on the macro accountability system. The best advantage of such micro level accountability is that it brings the service providers and recipients close to each other as co-stakeholders, reduces the communication gap, builds trust and creates conditions for win-win game for all parties.

⁹ For Further discussion on social accountability see, Samuel Paul, “Strengthening Public Accountability: New Approaches and Mechanisms”, Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore, 1995; Carmen Malena, et al, Social Accountability: An Introduction to the Concept and Emerging Practice”, The World Bank Paper No 76, December 2004.

It is in this context that the Citizens Charter as a non-conventional social accountability tool for empowering people and promoting good governance and transparent service delivery has to be viewed. Citizens Charter is a relatively new tool that according to the available literature, originated in UK in 1991 in the wake of an intense debate around the comparative efficiency of public service delivery with that of the private sector.¹⁰ The understanding of the Citizens Charter and the process about it have since evolved relatively fast, and were soon experimented with local adaptation and varying degree of success in such countries as France, Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Canada, Australia, Jamaica, Malaysia and India. In the process the Citizens Charter has come to be generally known as “the expression of understanding between the citizens and the providers of a public service with respect to the quantity and quality of service the former receive in exchange of their taxes”.¹¹ It is a legally non-binding document – a social contract between the service provider and service recipient about the rights of the latter and the obligations of the former.

In Bangladesh, the Public Administration Reform Commission recommended Citizens Charter in 2000¹², following which in January 2007, the then Caretaker Government issued an official order to introduce Citizens Charter in public offices including ministries and departments which led to the introduction of Citizen Charters in a large number of public institutions. These Citizens Charters, later coined as the “first generation Citizens Charters”, introduced as they were by the officials (service providers) in most cases without any participation of citizens (service recipients) had their obvious limitations¹³.

The election manifesto of the present Government contained a clear and specific electoral commitment that the second generation Citizens Charters will be introduced in every office. The Sixth Five Year Plan also makes a similar commitment of introducing and institutionalizing Citizens Charter by the ministries and agencies to ‘provide regular feedback’ and ‘enhance accountability’.¹⁴ The Government has already taken a significant initiative under the Ministry of Public Administration to introduce what is now known as the second generation Citizens Charter aiming at a fundamental qualitative transformation of the tool to ensure citizens’ participation in its preparation and implementation. Parallel with this Government effort and often jointly with the Government, some

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of the evolution, definition, content and process of the Citizens Charter see, Arif H Khan, “Citizens Charter: What, Why and How” (in Bangla), paper presented at a seminar organized by Manusher Jonno Foundation and Transparency International Bangladesh on September 1, 2008. See also, T. O’Neil, et al., “Evaluation of Citizen’s Voice and Accountability: Review of the Literature and Donor Approaches” (DFID, London, 2007).

¹¹ DARPG: “Citizens Charter – A Handbook” New Delhi, India 26 Aug 2008, quoted in *ibid*.

¹² Ferdous Jahan, “Public Administration in Bangladesh”, quoted in *ibid*.

¹³ Arif H Khan, *op cit*.

¹⁴ Planning Commission, Ministry of Planning, Government of Bangladesh, *Sixth Five Year Plan FY-2011-15, Strategic Directions and Policy Framework*, pp. 9, 31, 219.

non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of whom took similar initiatives in the earlier phase, have also continued with their own experiment for the transformation.

III. Citizens Charter and the Role of NGOs

The scope and potential of NGO involvement in the Citizens Charter initiative is a natural phenomenon in Bangladesh. Few other countries in the world have as vibrant, active and efficient NGO sector as in Bangladesh. There is hardly any aspect in socio-economic life in Bangladesh where NGOs are not present. Some of the NGO work and innovations have become international models replicated in many countries around the world. A close look at the work of NGOs will demonstrate that their work is about strengthening the hands of the Government on the one hand and empowering people on the other.

NGO-work is about challenging poverty; it is about contributing to the process of development and social change. NGOs complement the efforts of the Government in strengthening democracy, promoting democratic rights of the people and, catalyzing democratic institutionalization. NGOs have established a genuine reputation for being able to engage and work with the people relatively effectively at low cost. To the extent democracy and democratic rights mean alleviation of poverty, NGOs have the same goal as the Government. If democracy is about ensuring people's right to life, shelter, education, health, justice, and equality irrespective of sex, religion, culture ethnicity or any other marker of identity, NGOs are supporting the Government's efforts towards building democracy and promoting accountable and transparent governance.¹⁵

It is in this context that the role of NGOs in the Citizens Charter initiatives has to be viewed. In what follows here we present highlights of an initiative taken by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) under which Citizens Charters are being introduced in some selected institutions of public service delivery.

As far as TIB is concerned, Citizens Charter is not an end itself, nor can it be viewed in isolation from a set of other social accountability tools. It is a stage in a series of social accountability interventions leading to an innovation called Integrity Pledge (IP) that involves voluntary engagement of the officials and service providers with the service recipients and other citizens to promote transparency and accountability at the delivery of services in vital sectors such as education, health and local government. As a legally non-binding social contract, the IP¹⁶ contributes to accountability

¹⁵ Iftekharuzzaman, "NGOs in Bangladesh: A natural ally of the Government in promoting democracy", www.ti-bangladesh.org

¹⁶ The "Integrity Pact", the generic version of the Integrity Pledge has been working in different variations with varying degrees of success in many other countries around the world since it was introduced by Transparency International to promote accountability primarily in public procurement. TIB is the first to introduce it in selected institutions of public service delivery engaging various stakeholders at the service delivery end. At the heart of IP is the concept of public

and transparency in a process that involves in addition to Citizens Charter such non-conventional tools as Citizens Report Card, Advice & Information, Open Budget, Face the Public, which eventually lead to an Integrity Pledge. Introduced by TIB in 27 local level institutions of public service delivery, the IP has built-in process of application and monitoring.¹⁷

The Citizens Charter as experimented by TIB is essentially a stage of social accountability reached in a process built through a number of steps and tools.

Formulation and implementation process of Citizens Charter (The TIB experience)

Stage	Tasks carried out
1. Preparatory stage:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identification of institutions by Committees of Concerned Citizens (CCC), based on local demand for the development of Citizens Charter. 2. Discussion on Citizen Charter with the authorities and subject to consent obtain a designated focal point. 3. The CCC identifies local stakeholders, establishes primary contacts and secures their consent for involvement in the formulation process.
2. Formulation of draft citizen charter	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Forming committees such as Charter Formulation and Implementation Committee, Monitoring Committee, Information Collection and Problem-solving Committee during a multi-stakeholder workshop organized by CCC 2. Allocation of responsibilities among various members during the working committee meetings. 3. Adopt work plan for determining the goals and objectives of citizen charter during the preparatory meeting of the Charter Formulation and Implementation Committee 4. Provide orientation to officers and employees at different levels of the selected organization on the concept and process. 5. Assess the expectations of the service recipients regarding the quality of services through a Citizen's Report Card (CRC)¹⁸ survey. The authority is fully engaged in the design and implementation of the CRC survey and its tools. 6. Release the findings of the CRC report with the consent of the authorities and in the presence of the relevant stakeholders. 7.. After the release of the CRC report, based on its findings jointly determine the content of the Citizens Charter and the next steps.

accountability through voice, demand and participation of stakeholders. Countries where this generic version is being used to promote transparency mainly in the field of public procurement with varying degrees of success, include: China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, Thailand, Taiwan, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Peru. Several other countries, Poland, Malaysia, Uganda, Nigeria, are in the process of introducing the same. For details, see www.transparency.org

¹⁷ See for more on IP, Iftekharuzzaman and Sajjad Husain, "The Integrity Pledge: Participatory Governance through Social Accountability" Paper presented at the International Seminar organized by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in Dhaka, on April 11, 2010, www.ti-bangladesh.org

¹⁸ The Citizen's Report Card (CRC) is a tool to measure the degree of satisfaction of service recipients about the content and quality of service provided by a selected institution of public service delivery. Service recipients' response collected through a sample survey are triangulated with information collected through interviews and consultations with the authority, focused group discussions and/or key informant interviews. The findings of the CRC are released usually with the participation of the authority which serves the twin purpose of wider public information and awareness as well as engagement with the authority in efforts for follow-up initiatives. CRCs are an advocacy tool for improving the service quality at the delivery end within given resources and capacities. It also functions as a medium of building a working relationship between the service providers and recipients.

	<p>8. Provide training to staff and employees of the organization about the Charter, its process, implementation and implications.</p> <p>9. The draft citizen charter is finalized by the Charter Implementation Committee</p>
3. Finalization of citizen charter	<p>1. Secure opinion and feedback of all stakeholders on draft Citizens Charter</p> <p>2. Finalize the Citizens Charter in a workshop attended by all stakeholders including senior officials of the institutions and representatives of the relevant authorities.</p>
4. Release of citizen charter and awareness raising activities	<p>1. A billboard on citizen charter is mounted in a suitable location in the presence of stakeholders, local administration and people from all walks of life.</p> <p>2. Undertake public awareness and communication campaign among the people at large in the command area of the institutions. The mobile AI-Desks conducted by the young volunteers mobilised under the banner of the Youth Engagement and Support (YES) play a vital role in this.¹⁹</p>
5. Implementation, Monitoring & grievance redressal	<p>The monitoring committee takes on the responsibility to track if necessary services are being provided as promised through citizen charter. This is done mainly by the members of CCCs and young members of the Youth Engagement & Support (YES) groups. Besides observing the activities of the organization, people's views about the services are collected and a monitoring report prepared for sharing it with the authorities. In addition, the CCC maintains liaison with the authorities for maintaining expected level of services to the people by the authorities. This also creates the opportunity for grievance redressal, if any, jointly with the service provider and recipient.</p>
6. Evaluation	<p>The information generated through monitoring help assess change, if any, in the quality of services and satisfaction level of the service recipients. The findings are shared with the authorities and all relevant stakeholders. Based on these necessary amendments and further campaign and communication tools and processes are developed and applied collectively to ensure continued And necessary advocacy and campaign activities are undertaken side by side.</p>

The reasons why this approach to the second generation Citizens Charter is different:

Issues	Second generation Citizens Charter	First generation citizen charter
1. Goal and objectives of the formulation and implementation Citizen Charter	Participatory determination and articulation with a particular emphasis on an enabling environment for service delivery through transparency, accountability and mutual ownership.	Developed through official order without participation of the service recipients.
2. Citizens' engagement	Developed locally through the active and voluntary participation of CCC and YES engaging other local NGOs/CSOs,	Citizens and relevant stakeholders were not involved.

¹⁹ Access to information is considered as the touchstone of empowerment. Those who are in possession of information are powerful, while those who do not have the information are powerless. People are often victims of corruption because of lack of information and knowledge about their rights and entitlements as well as the range of services, rates of payment where applicable, grievance mechanisms, etc. From this perspective TIB has introduced a mobile advice and information service titled Advice and Information Desk (AI-Desk), usually provided to the service recipients in the premises of the relevant institution. Another complementary process in this connection is the street theatre and other cultural tools. The primary objective is to equip the service recipients with the information that helps the voice and accountability process.

	media and relevant stakeholders	
3. Collective ownership	The whole process being participatory, a spirit of ownership of the Charter is developed early on.	Absent.
4. Mutual appreciation of expectations and limitations	A horizontal process of interfacing between the service providing organization and the service recipients ensured that both sides appreciate each other's expectations and limitations, rights and responsibilities.	No scope – vertical.
5. Sources of information	Findings of the surveys and information collected from the organization.	Organization only.
6. Key determinant in public expectations	Data and information from the Citizens Report Card	Unilateral official guideline.
7. Multi-stakeholders involvement	A list of local stakeholders involving civil society, stakeholders and media is prepared by the CCC	No such initiative
8. Formation of committees	A charter formulation and implementation committee comprised of 10-15 people is formed during an inception workshop, participated by the relevant people from the organization, CCCs, other local NGOs/CSOs and media.	Preorogative of the officials.
9. Stakeholders' capacity building	Orientation is given to staff and employees of the organization by the charter formulation and implementation committee	No scope.
10. Drafting process	The charter formulation and implementation committee prepares a draft charter	Official(s) prepared the draft and submitted to the higher authority.
11. Feedback on the draft	The charter formulation and implementation committee collects feedback on the draft from local stakeholders and the concerned authorities.	Feedback is received from peer and senior officials
12. Endorsement	Citizen charter is formally adopted in a workshop and approved by the Committee	Senior officials approved.
13. Formal launch of the Citizens Charter	In the presence and participation of relevant authorities, local administration and all relevant stakeholders and service recipients.	Official instruction.
14. Campaign and awareness	Campaign and awareness raising through AI-Desks, Street theatre and other cultural tools inside and outside of the organization as appropriate.	No such activities undertaken
15. Implementation, monitoring, grievance redressal and evaluation	Implementation and monitoring are in the hands of the monitoring committee, formed with CCC and YES, who also	No arrangement.

	ensure grievance redressal, if any. Periodic evaluation through multi-stakeholder involvement.	
16. A tool for social accountability	Promises to be an effective tool for social accountability by engaging all stakeholders, especially building a bridge between service providers and recipients in a participatory process. .	No scope.

IV. The Citizens Charter: Challenges Ahead

All parties to the Citizens Charter believe that successful implementation will generate further interest, ownership and thereby more effective enforcement with the scope of further replication and up-scaling. On the other hand failure in proper implementation and monitoring leading to lower than expected level of results will jeopardize the whole process. The main challenges are:

1. Limits to possible changes are determined by the level of the given resources and capacities at the level of the concerned institution. Higher levels of success will depend on supportive policy and institutional change as well as necessary resource allocation from the national level.
2. The Citizens Charter being conceptually built on participation, any shortfall in ensuring it, especially of the service recipients, mainly poor and disadvantaged, will be severely damaging.
3. The instrument and the process are built on voluntary participation of all stakeholders. Hence erosion of volunteerism will jeopardize the prospect of its success.
4. The process through which the Citizens Charter has come into being is a learning by doing. Much would depend therefore on the skills and capacities of the stakeholders to successfully enforce it.
5. Like any other social accountability tool, the Citizens Charter is a legally non-binding instrument with no scope of legal redress in case of violation by any of the parties involved. Therefore, the key to its success is the continued commitment and ownership of all stakeholders supported by favourable political will and administrative support at all levels.
6. The Citizens Charter is not an end itself; it is a stage in a process to ensure higher levels of transparency and accountability. Hence it cannot be viewed in isolation from the overall socio-political and institutional context. Failure to duly appreciate abiding realities may create overload of expectations and can be self-defeating.
