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Local-level complaint mechanisms in developing countries

Query

Please provide information about concrete success stories of complaint mechanisms at the local level in the context of developing countries, specifically relating to service delivery.

Purpose

The answer will be used to inform research on local complaint mechanisms in Benin.

Content

1. Summary

Complaint mechanisms are valuable tools to increase accountability in governments, businesses and civil society organisations. They offer citizens avenues to provide feedback and submit complaints to these bodies in order to improve their services. In the last two decades, increasing efforts to tackle corruption, as well as a growing tendency towards decentralisation of government services to the local level, have seen the supply of and demand for complaint mechanisms rise considerably across the developing world.

There are a number of key principles to take into account when designing and implementing a complaint mechanism at the local level, such as transparency, independence, accountability, accessibility, safety and user-friendliness. In particular, ensuring citizens have access to the mechanism, guaranteeing user safety and providing effective redress are essential elements for success.

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2. Complaint mechanisms

For the last 20 years, there has been a global tendency to increase the autonomy of sub-national governments and to decentralise responsibilities from central to local governments. While degrees of decentralisation vary from country to country, in many cases local governments have had to take over services previously run by central governments. A combination of inexperience and limited capacities for the administration of these services and the availability of resources for public expenditure at local level can make local governments highly vulnerable to corruption and mismanagement.

The establishment of complaint mechanisms is increasingly recognised as a critical part of a larger set of measures that promote transparency and accountability at the local level. Complaint mechanisms are formal processes that allow citizens to complain or provide feedback to governments, and that address the complaints in a systematic way. These mechanisms generally involve three stages: first, users file their complaints; second, responsible authorities review these complaints; third, the user is informed personally or publicly about actions taken to address the complaint. This process may take many forms and may also be initiated by third parties on behalf of complainants.

Benefits and challenges associated with local-level complaint mechanisms

There are many expected benefits of setting up a complaint mechanism at the local level. A well-designed and well-managed mechanism for handling complaints can improve the quality of public service delivery, enhance the trust and confidence of citizens in their local governments and help identify areas of work which need to be improved (World Vision 2011).

Accountability of local governments to citizens can be greatly improved by providing citizens with an avenue to express their opinions and concerns as well as to report irregularities. When appropriate action is taken and sanctions are imposed, local complaint mechanisms can contribute to holding local governments accountable against the promises and commitments made to their constituents.

By setting up a complaint mechanism, local governments publicly demonstrate a political will to fight corruption, and their commitment to integrity standards and values. This signals a low tolerance for corruption, can have a deterrent effect, and can contribute to building the profile of local governments as transparent and accountable public institutions.

Complaints also provide valuable information about the overall quality of public service delivery. They provide feedback on the way local institutions operate, and can be used as a diagnostic tool to provide insights and information that may not otherwise emerge. As such, they can contribute to improving the impact and effectiveness of service delivery through early identification and management of issues and risks, as well as continuous monitoring and learning. They can constitute a cost-effective way for local governments to identify and address service delivery problems at an early stage. Local governments can avoid hiring consultants and technicians to identify problem areas with their services, and do not have to wait until electoral periods to receive feedback from community members about services (Compliance Advisor Ombudsman 2009).

Complaint mechanisms also have an important function in detecting and dealing with fraud and corruption at the local level. User complaints can help detect specific cases of corruption and more generally contribute to identifying sectors or areas that are particularly vulnerable to corruption. Complaints can also assist with evaluation of the quality of public contracts, and help determine whether these met government standards or were corruptly conceived.

Complaint mechanisms also have an important empowering function for citizens by providing victims of corruption with an official recourse.

Complaint mechanisms can contribute to building citizens' trust in local governments and lead to a culture of increased participation. As citizens learn how to complain about services and gain confidence that their complaints will be addressed in a timely and effective manner, their trust in the governmental process may be enhanced and they may be more likely to participate in other areas of government.

There are also several challenges in implementing complaint mechanisms at the local level.

Political will is critical for the successful implementation of a complaint mechanism. Complaints-handling needs to be supported and backed up by the local government's senior management staff and leaders. For example, a local government that has administrative autonomy but is not elected to office may not see the benefits of involving the community in its affairs.

There are also resource and capacity challenges involved in setting up effective complaint mechanisms. Local governments and institutions may suffer from resource constraints, either because of a general lack of resources at all levels of government, or because of spending limits imposed by the central government (Shah 2006). Many local governments around the world are relatively new, and may not have the technical capacity or experience to implement a mechanism that effectively manages and responds to citizen feedback. Addressing such challenges is all the more important, given that expectations may be raised when citizens have an opportunity to express their voice. If their feedback is ignored or no action is taken in response, citizens may lose faith in the mechanism.

In societies transitioning from civil war or conflict, underdeveloped complaint mechanisms may create divisions if access to them is not universal or if in the governmental response to complaints is slow or biased towards certain sectors of society.

Fundamental principles for designing an effective complaint mechanism

Despite these challenges, many local governments across the developing world are implementing complaint mechanisms. There is no blueprint for setting up a complaint mechanism as it needs to be adapted to the local context, taking into account issues such as cultural norms and values, levels of literacy, phone coverage and social patterns, among others (Chêne 2013).

There is little literature on complaint mechanisms specifically focusing at the local level. However, irrespective of the type of complaint mechanism, there is broad consensus on key principles to consider for developing effective complaint mechanisms. The mechanism should be transparent, independent, accountable, accessible, safe and easy to use. The service should be available to anyone who is willing to report a complaint. It is also important to make sure that subsequent and thorough investigations are launched into these complaints, and that all possible action is taken to support the victim and seek redress. The mechanism should not discriminate between users, and should aim to include the most vulnerable and marginalised people (Save the Children 2008).

More specifically, some key principles for designing a complaint mechanism include:

Power to investigate and provide redress

Staff assigned to complaint mechanisms should have the authority to investigate, gather evidence and provide some sort of redress or response to complainants. If they lack any of these powers, the effectiveness of the mechanism could be undermined..

Safety

The process of submitting and managing complaints should ensure the safety of the complainant, either by assuring anonymity (or at least confidentiality) or by providing protection from retaliation. The institutional set-up of the mechanism must guarantee a certain level of independence from those persons and institutions being complained about. If a person cannot complain about a service for fear of retaliation, they will not use the service.

Impartiality

Related to the above, a consistent level of impartiality and objectivity should be adhered to during investigations as well as in decision-making. Complaints should be looked into and redressed regardless of the person making the complaint. This is especially true in the case of possible whistle-blowers who may work within the local government receiving the complaint.

Accessibility

Complaint mechanisms should be accessible in an unrestricted manner for any person wishing to make a complaint. Information about the complaints process should be shared widely, in clear and simple language, and made available at the community level with clear rules about how to report and to whom. In the context of developing countries, it is critical that these complaint mechanisms are available free of charge, thus increasing access to low-income sectors of society. Furthermore, to ensure people's safety and comfort, both individuals and community groups should be able to make complaints. As

many individuals may fear reprisal or inaction if they complain on their own, or simply because many individuals have to work during hours when local governments are available to accept complaints, third party groups can ensure the safety and access of individuals to complaint mechanisms.

Reporting channels

It is important to offer a variety of channels for reporting complaints, including exploring the potential of using information and communication technology. There are several channels which can be used including hotlines, dedicated staff (such as ombudsmen or helpdesks) and suggestion boxes, among others. There should not, however, be any preference or bias towards one type of complaint channel over another.

Legitimacy

A complaint mechanism must have clear, transparent and independent governance structures to ensure that the process of receiving and handling complaints is fair.

Transparency

A complaint mechanism should be operated in a transparent manner. Users and members of the community should know of its existence and procedures, and should be informed about rules regarding disclosure and confidentiality of operators. Complaint mechanisms should periodically report on any changes to these rules, and also periodically report on its activities (World Vision 2011). Transparency helps in creating a dialogue between complaint bodies and communities, informing the public about the government's efforts for improving service delivery and reinforcing the community's faith that filing formal complaints will lead to appropriate government action.

For more information, please see Good practice in community complaints mechanisms

3. Examples of local government complaint mechanisms in developing countries

Complaint mechanisms are increasingly popular across all regions of the world. However, there are few concrete examples of successes from developing countries. The examples below illustrate complaint mechanisms that were established following all or most of the fundamental principles indicated above, and where those mechanisms have contributed positively to the local community.

Promoting accessibility

In many cases, local governments must provide services to a community stretched across a wide geographical area or, in the case of rural communities, where many citizens live outside urbanised centres and lack access to efficient communication channels. To address these challenges, many governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) have provided several avenues of communication to promote accessibility to services and facilitate the submission of complaints.

Naga City in the Philippines, for example, created an "I-Government" platform to capture citizen feedback on public service delivery as well as to receive and act on complaints. This mechanism allows citizens to file their complaints by e-mail, post, phone and through community forums involving CSOs and local authorities. "I-Government" went a step further by providing an SMS service enabling citizens to text complaints to the municipality or to the mayor of the city. "The Text the Mayor" Service was the most used access point to the programme in 2009, as people felt that their complaints would be more effectively dealt with by the mayor. The service, however, did suffer a significant setback in terms of accessibility in that it did not provide information about the service in Bicol, the local language, thus marginalising parts of the community. Overall, Naga City's I-Government increased the amount of complaints received by the locality, but it did not fully meet citizen expectations in terms of addressing these complaints. A later study on I-Government revealed that citizens were not informed about the progress made on dealing with their complaints, and those who were aware of progress did not consider their complaints to have been properly redressed (Penaranda Principe 2009).

Many CSOs use a similar multimedia approach to reach people that may not have access to the official complaint mechanisms offered by their local governments. Awareness-raising of the service is an important pre-requisite for making it accessible to the targeted audiences. Transparency International Uganda, for example,

established a mechanism to submit complaints and provide feedback relating to health services in three districts in Northern Uganda, a rural and sparsely populated region of the country. The mechanism uses a hotline and a social media platform to collect comments and then conveys these to the local government. TI Uganda managed to raise awareness by launching FM radio broadcasts with information about the initiative. These broadcasts reached large numbers of people over an extensive area. The programme has proven successful in increasing reports of absenteeism and is set to be extended into other districts (Transparency International Uganda 2014).

Similarly, the website Checkmyschool.org, based in the Philippines, uses Google Maps to map out 8,000 schools and provide a web-based platform where users can view information about the physical state of their schools, and see complaints filed against the school and feedback from citizens and administrators. The platform allows citizens to provide feedback via SMS, Facebook, Twitter, e-mail or through the actual website. On a monthly basis, one school was chosen to become the focus of a small campaign for authorities to follow up on complaints. The programme was successful in properly collecting complaints and creating real and consistent solutions to the problems of the school highlighted in its campaigns. In most cases, local governments heeded the requests and immediate renovations were authorised (Singh 2013).

Even the most accessible services that reach a large part of local communities may suffer setbacks as a result of violence, intimidation and fear, which may constrain citizens' willingness to complain. Thus, safety is an important priority for any government or organisation wishing to implement an effective complaint mechanism.

Ensuring user safety

If people can complain about the quality of their public services without fear of retaliation, they will be more likely to report possible service irregularities or failures. As mentioned previously, if complaints can be filed anonymously or through a third party, users might feel safer in making their complaint.

This was the case in Uganda, where the Masindi District Education Network (MADEN) established suggestion boxes with a privacy guarantee in a number of schools. Parents and concerned community members were worried about complaining of issues such as physical abuse and lack of resources, for fear of retribution directed towards their children. The suggestion boxes offered an anonymous channel where children, parents and other stakeholders could file complaints. The questions were collected on a weekly basis and read out by representatives of MADEN to the School Management Committee. In this way, issues were raised and discussed with school management through a representative without individuals being identified (Tembo 2012).

Tearfund also tried to set up a complaint mechanism that would ensure user safety in its drought response projects in Northern Kenya. It established Beneficiary Reference Groups (BRGs) composed of individuals whose duty was to receive verbal complaints and convey them to project coordinators and local leaders. In addition, locked complaint boxes were set up to allow more sensitive complaints to be voiced safely and anonymously. These boxes were called "suggestion" boxes, as the term "complaint" has a negative connotation in the region. While staff members were in charge of the operation of the suggestion boxes, local leaders opened them twice a month in order to read the suggestions and address the issues raised. Responses were posted publicly on community noticeboards to alert community members of the progress in complaints redress. The BRGs were successful in assuring safety and saw a significant increase in the number of complaints made, with an average of five complaints filed per month in relation to perceived corruption and nepotism in the hiring of workers or selection of beneficiaries.

An alternative way to ensure the safety of complainants is to collect responses and deliver them to government on an aggregate/macro scale. Citizen Report Cards, as used by Transparency International Bangladesh, or Community Score Cards are good examples of this. In the case of Citizen Report Cards, citizens are asked to rate their local government on the quality of the services rendered and suggest areas for improvement. This feedback is collected, averaged, and presented to the government as report cards. TI Bangladesh encouraged local governments to sign integrity pacts where they promised to improve their scores. Not only did this system assure anonymity to all respondents, it also had positive results in influencing service delivery when coupled with the integrity pacts.

This programme was very successful in the education sector, where 27 different institutions in 25 districts signed up to the programme, and in several cases schools saw significant improvements in attendance, drops in absenteeism and significantly better reviews overall[1] (Zaman 2013; Transparency International Bangladesh 2014).

Community Score Cards operate in a similar way but also involve community groups such as CSOs and social forums. Score Cards are collected and presented in an aggregate scale to local governments in the same ways that Citizen Report Cards are presented. Some examples of these systems being used successfully are by the Public Policy Information Monitoring and Advocacy (PPIMA) project in villages in Rwanda (Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa 2006) and in rural Karachi in Pakistan (Shehri-Citizens for a Better Environment 2013).

Addressing complaints and creating change

Accessibility and safety must be accompanied by government responsiveness and results. Without visible answers and solutions to complaints, complaint mechanisms lose any sense of legitimacy and effectiveness among the community. It is important to also build the trust of service users through the mechanism's ability to effectively address concerns and create change.

In this respect, the not-for-profit organisation Daraja, which initiated a programme in 2013 called Maji Matone ("raising the water pressure") in Tanzania, deserves special mention. In Tanzania, only 54% of the water points function properly and this programme aims to enable communities to report breakdowns of water points directly to the local authorities. Communities send SMS messages directly to engineers[2] to request repairs. This project was initially efficient in pushing for more local government attention to rural water access. Between 2006 and 2012, local budgets dedicated to rural water access increased by 400 per cent. Nevertheless, citizen engagement through SMS began to dwindle after the initial phase, for several reasons. First, many problems in rural areas were not addressed because the media did not pick up on these complaints with the same enthusiasm with which they reported complaints made in highly populated urban areas, and thus governments did not feel enough pressure to address them. Second, government reaction to the programme, and especially to the complainants was not positive, and some people began to consider it unsafe to complain about the water system (Schouten 2012). This case highlights the fact that without ensuring user safety and positive results, complaint mechanisms may not serve the communities they aim to help.

From an administrative point of view, it is relatively straightforward to address problems regarding service delivery, such as technical problems and corruption related to services provision. The local government of Lahore, Pakistan, had considerable success addressing corruption in its land registry services in 2013. Land registration services in Lahore were considered to have significant problems with corruption and employee misconduct. The government established a complaint mechanism within the land registry process itself, where as part of completing official forms for land registry, citizens could opt to receive an SMS message or a call to their personal phone in order to provide feedback. After receiving the call or text, citizens were encouraged to report problems regarding the service, especially corruption, and name the office they dealt with. The information was kept anonymous. The government used the information to map out in which offices corruption and misconduct were most prevalent, and began addressing problems almost as soon as the programme was launched. The programme's success can be measured by the response rate of citizens and the number of investigations launched: About one million people were contacted through the initial SMS or phone message, and about 175,000 responded to the survey. Of these, 6,000 reported corruption and 18,000 others reported service-related issues. The government acted on these complaints and has so far produced 100 investigative reports into these allegations (Abbot 2013).

The state of Karnanata in India had similar experiences in addressing corruption through its complaint mechanism. The Karnanata government gave the existing position of

[1] For more information on the methodology and case studies, please see the Citizen Report Card Manual available here.

[2] These engineers are special partners with Maji Matone.

Lokayukta (ombudsman) more powers to follow up investigations and present allegations of corruption and misconduct in court. The health sector in the state was reported to have considerable problems related to employee misconduct and mismanagement of resources. The Lokayukta partnered with several local Vigilance Directors for Health, Education and Family Welfare (VDHs) in order to collect and address complaints. VDHs collected complaints through hotlines and complaints boxes in district hospitals and through the office of the ombudsman itself. The Lokayukta launched 800 investigations between 2001 and 2005, which led to more than 500 prosecutions and about 88 convictions. More importantly, the process changed the way the government interacted with citizens. Citizens increasingly came forward as the success of the Lokayukta was made public. The Lokayukta's strategy of citizen consultation to understand the complexity of sectors' problems was later applied to other areas of the state government (Vian 2013).

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