

## HOLDING THE STATE TO ACCOUNT: CITIZEN MONITORING IN ACTION BY SAMUEL PAUL

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*Holding the State to Account: Citizen Monitoring in Action.* Samuel Paul; Bangalore, Books for Change, 2002, 196 pages

Residents of most developed countries routinely encounter report cards produced by newspapers, interest groups, government agencies, or research centers that provide comparative information on the performance of organizations ranging from schools to airlines to nursing homes. (See Gormley and Weimer, 1999, for an assessment of the use of report cards as policy instruments in the United States.) By providing information for assessing relative performance across agencies or over time, the report cards facilitate not only top-down accountability from regulators and funders, but also bottom-up accountability from consumers. In developed countries, bottom-up accountability generally operates through market choice or political participation. In developing countries, the report cards may also play the role of providing a focal point for the strengthening of civil society. *Holding the State to Account* tells a very informative, reflective, analytical, and hopeful story of the impact of the introduction of report cards on municipal services in Bangalore, India. It deserves the attention of public management scholars and practitioners, especially those who are concerned about improving the delivery of local public services in developing countries.

The book makes general statements about the important role of citizen involvement in improving public services, and the role of report cards in facilitating such involvement. It also provides a mini-handbook on implementing survey-based report cards. The heart of the book, however, is a detailed account of the preparation, reception, and impact of report cards on Bangalore public-service agencies in 1993-94 and 1999. The first report card was initiated by the author, Samuel Paul, and friends as an experiment to see if citizen feedback could prod improvement in public services. The second report card was implemented by the newly created Public Affairs Centre, of which Paul is the chairperson. Pairs of chapters provide the substance and impact of each of these report cards. Additional chapters consider related efforts elsewhere in India and draw out general lessons.

The report cards themselves were based on surveys administered to random samples of general households with access to most public services, and poorer households in slums where the availability of services was itself a major problem. The surveys asked questions about satisfaction with staff behavior, quality of service, and information provided for eight (ten in the second report card) public agencies. The levels of

satisfaction were quite low in the first survey. For example, the percentage of respondents who were satisfied with the quality of service ranged from 2 percent for the Bangalore Development Authority to 26 percent for the Regional Transport Office. The second survey also elicited the percentages of respondents who reported improvement in the quality of services in the past three years. These ranged from a low of 16 percent for the Bangalore Development Authority to a high of 80 percent for Bangalore Telecom, an agency that shed secondary services and faced growing competition from cell phones.

Perhaps the most interesting component of the surveys were questions aimed at discovering hidden costs, such as those resulting from bribes, delays, and switching to self-provision, of public services. In the first survey, among general households 50 percent of respondents reported being asked for bribes by agency personnel, and 14 percent of respondents reported actually paying bribes, ("speed money") to obtain services. The percentage of poor households that reported paying bribes was much higher, 32 percent. Despite the perceived improvements in the quality of services found in the second survey, the levels of corruption, extortion, and bribery, remained high. Further, households spent considerable sums on water tanks, generators, and other investments to reduce the adverse effects of low quality utility service.

How did the public agencies respond to the report cards? Interestingly, their own absence of data on performance prevented them from challenging the veracity of the findings and blaming the messenger, a common response for organizations that receive low report card grades. The actual responses of agency leaders varied, but at least some viewed the information as a valuable resource for their efforts to reform their own agencies. The second report card, disseminated in more sophisticated ways, also had the effect of encouraging exchange across agencies, as their managers sought ideas on improving quality from their colleagues in agencies with better grades.

Did the report cards affect civic culture? The report cards, which were covered extensively in the press, seem to have been catalysts for the formation of a number of citizen groups concerned about the quality of particular public services. Open house meetings on particular topics organized by the Public Affairs Centre flourished, including one that led to an information campaign related to the 1997 municipal elections. The report cards may also have influenced efforts by the state government to focus attention on infrastructure problems in Bangalore. Overall, it appears that the report cards and the related activity of the Public Affairs Centre helped launch and sustain much greater citizen involvement in seeking public accountability.

The conclusions are reasoned and modest. My only criticism is the absence of discussion of when report cards are likely to have an impact. Are there political, social, or economic prerequisites for success?

In summary, *Holding the State to Account* is a superior practice-based book. It provides a useful conceptual framework for thinking about the problem of public accountability, richly describes the particular intervention made in an effort to improve public service quality, offers considerable evidence of its impact on agencies and civil society, and provides a useful guide for those who would like to consider using the intervention. It would make a nice addition to the syllabus of courses in comparative public management.

## REFERENCE

- Gormley, William T., Jr., and David L. Weimer. 1999. *Organizational Report Cards*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.