

## CITIZEN ORIENTATION

As a result of recent changes within the public service, there is a desire in many countries to orient public services, like those produced in the private sector, towards the needs of service-users. This change in emphasis has been due in part to a conscious reshaping of the work culture to achieve a customer or client orientation. Courtesy campaigns, customer-care training, and comprehensive complaints procedures ensure that service-users are seen as active, freely-choosing customers rather than passive recipients of monopolistically-provided state services.

Customer orientation is an area in which it is difficult to generalise at national level. Independent local governments have been using a variety of experiments with customer orientation over services in many countries. Not all the experiments involve the use of market mechanisms but include a variety of forms of consultation and participation in decision-making. These efforts to improve service have been complemented by the development of avenues of redress.

### SETTING SERVICE STANDARDS

In some countries, there are initiatives to develop a customer-oriented culture for public service delivery by establishing service standards and evaluating performance based on measures of productivity and service quality.

- Australia's FMIP Performance Information and Management Cycle requires agencies to develop standards to monitor service quality systematically and publish evaluation results.
- Canada's Public Service 2000 Budget initiative requires departments to develop and publish service standards, but these must be fiscally neutral.

#### **Example of the Negeri Sembilan Water Supply Department in Malaysia**

As part of its customer focus, the Negeri Sembilan Water Supply Department in Malaysia has introduced the slogan 'Courtesy to the public'. The Customer Service Unit has introduced mechanisms such as radio sessions, meet-the-people sessions, and one-day seminars to gather feedback and at the same time disseminate information to members of the public. Other facilities introduced include mobile counter services or appointing agents to act on behalf of the Department in remote locations, putting up billboards to inform the public on the availability of the hotline service, and the distribution of pamphlets on the Department's activities.

The introduction of Citizen's or Client's Charters signify the commitment of governments, like those of the UK and Malaysia, to the provision of services and outputs to its customers according to set quality guidelines. Schemes such as these recognise that it is the point of interface with a citizen, business or organisation which is most crucial in formulating public perceptions of government services. Images and attitudes are based on direct experiences of service delivery at the point of contact with public servants, waiting in line to post a letter, for example. Therefore, by improving client orientation at these levels, significant changes in public perception can be achieved, even for those functions which remain within the core public sector.

#### **The UK Citizen's Charter**

The principles of customer orientation as defined in the UK Citizen's Charter and similar initiatives can be set out as:

- Setting and publicising standards for the services that individual users and private sector firms and other organisations that use public services, can reasonably expect.
- Providing full, accurate information about how services are run, what they cost, how well they perform, and who is in charge.
- The public sector should offer choice wherever practicable and systematic consultation with users of services to determine priorities for service improvements.
- Front-line staff should offer a courteous and helpful service, wearing name-badges and providing convenient opening hours.
- Service-users should have access to an easy-to-use complaints procedure; and if the service has been defective, they should receive an apology, a full explanation and swift and effective redress.

The Citizen's Charter has resulted in more privatisation and contracting out, wider competition and more rigorous and independent inspectorates.

In addition, the UK Government organises the 'Chartermark' scheme which is an award for excellence in delivering public services. Organisations applying must demonstrate the extent to which they have adopted the principles of public service set out in the Citizens' Charter. A charter mark means an organisation has shown that it puts its users first. In 1993, 93 awards given under the scheme were presented by the Prime Minister to public organisations providing services in the following fields: health, local government, privatised utilities, agencies/central government and a small group of 'other' services. In the same year, the Malaysia Government introduced an award for the best formulated Client's Charter.

While market-type reforms are based on the service-user as a 'customer', there is also a concern for the role of citizenship and rights to influence policy and decision-making.

- In Australia, improved client services has been a significant part of the government's reform programme. The Government and ministers decide on what kind and level of services should be provided, on the basis of assessments of the needs and interests of client groups. It is the responsibility of the Public Service and its staff to see that the services desired by the government are delivered effectively, efficiently and in a timely fashion, with proper courtesy and sensitivity and with full regard to the legal rights and entitlements of clients. For the Public Service, this is the nub of client focus and service quality.

#### **Customer Service in the UK Passport Agency**

Traditionally an area of the Civil Service that was criticised for its slow and uncommunicative service, the former Passport Office has been transformed since gaining Agency status in 1991. Customers now receive passports within 20 days at peak times of business, 10 days at other times. These are targets set and published by the Agency itself. The Agency also conducts regular surveys of customer opinion. All staff in contact with the public now wear name badges and standard clothing and receive comprehensive customer-care training. Special facilities have been established as part of the Agency's commitment to meet the needs of customers with disabilities.

#### **INTERNALLY-FOCUSED APPROACH**

Some administrations have adopted an approach to customer service that is essentially internally-focused. The service providers define service standards, publicise them, and then try to implement and deliver the standards. The customers are not involved in the choice of criteria or in setting the expected standards, but do have a right of redress or compensation if the published standards are not met.

#### **IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY AND PARTICIPATION**

One aspect of citizen orientation is the attempt to make existing services more accessible by the relocation of offices nearer clusters of client populations, the use of alternative delivery mechanisms, the use of information technology, and more convenient opening hours.

Some country programmes provide a single access point to a range of services. This 'one-stop shop' idea has been implemented in many places, including the

Ministry of Industry, Mauritius, and UK local government. However, from the customer's viewpoint, the 'one-stop shop' rarely includes services provided by more than one level of government; municipalities may organise access to all their services in one place, but the customer still has to travel to access the services from the regional or federal level.

Along with improved accessibility, many administrations are trying to simplify procedures to make them more comprehensible to the customers, using plain language and eliminating jargon and codes. Forms are redesigned and simplified, procedures are explained, and staff are trained to make services more user-friendly.

#### **The Blue Pages**

It is estimated that in the United States the public consults telephone directories at least 80 million times each year to find the phone number of a government organisation. There are over 6,000 directories which list government numbers in different ways and tend to focus on organisational structures which do not necessarily respond to citizen's needs. 'The Blue Pages Project' is radically changing the presentation of phone numbers, organising information around functions and services provided, publishing Internet and electronic mail addresses and fax numbers. This format is to be applied consistently throughout the country.

#### **MEASURING CLIENT SATISFACTION**

The active participation of clients is another key objective. Citizens' participation helps to ensure that the administration takes account of their needs, and fosters a sense of joint responsibility for outcomes. Government organisations must find out what services clients need and how well existing services fare. For this, consultative mechanisms need to be strengthened. Many organisations now make greater use of client surveys, public hearings, and meetings with interest groups, and have welcomed input from the public.

- The Canadian Treasury Board publishes a guide to public service managers of how best to measure client satisfaction. It points out that citizens have concerns which are both direct (courtesy of staff, prompt service, clear forms and signs, etc.) and indirect (fairness and equity, health and safety, value for money, etc.) and that both need to be assessed.
- The Public Complaints Bureau in Malaysia ensures that citizens are informed of their right to redress in annual reports, information clinics around the country, radio broadcasts and advertisements in local papers.

### **Client surveys in India and Uganda**

In Bangalore, India, citizens and businesses complete 'report cards' in order to rate the public agencies which they use to solve problems or get services. The report cards, administered by the Public Affairs Centre in Bangalore, an NGO, assess the quality and cost of citizens' interactions with public agencies. In the first assessment of report cards, the Bangalore Development Authority, responsible for housing and other services, were rated as satisfactory by only one per cent of respondents. Rather than viewing this result as a threat, though, the authority's director took them as an opportunity, launching a citizen-government initiative to address delivery problems. Other agencies in Bangalore as well as groups in five other cities have also taken action inspired by the report card approach.

The Ugandan Government is working with NGOs and communities carrying out surveys to obtain views on service delivery. The first survey found that just 11 per cent of rural households had ever been visited by an agricultural extension worker. Several districts have incorporated the survey findings into their district plans. One district has instituted further training for extension workers and is lobbying the central government for permission to spend more of its budget on extension workers.

Governments have found that by using the experience of citizens and involving them in monitoring and evaluating services, these approaches have helped to identify problems and implement innovative solutions resulting in better public sector performance.

- A 1997 survey undertaken for the Australian Public Service revealed that customers were quite clear about what was most important to them. In order of priority, these were:
  - the ability to speak to the right person;
  - fast and efficient service;
  - fair treatment;
  - friendly and courteous staff;
  - value for money;
  - access to and availability of facilities; and
  - the appearance and manner of staff.

As a result, public servants have been able to concentrate on making the changes that matter most to their clients, such as introducing 'main contact officers' who deal with all the different cases involving an allotted group of clients. These clients, in turn, are able to do all their business through one point of contact.

## **PUBLIC REPORTING**

Public reporting is the practical means by which openness and transparency in government are improved. It is in keeping with a customer-orientated approach. Providing information on the financial and managerial performance of departments enables the public to understand and, where necessary, criticise or support what the public service is seeking to achieve. This encourages a sharing of national vision, values and aspirations and, in particular, stimulates an enhanced level of public expectations about public services.

- Malaysia's Public Complaints Bureau publishes an Annual Report which is available to the public together with a report on the administrative efforts undertaken by the Government and its progress.

### **Citizen orientation and encouraging feedback**

Incorporated in Singapore's 'Public Service for the 21st Century' (PS21) initiative is an open pledge to the public that they will be given quality service. Feedback and suggestions are explicitly sought. The pledge is openly displayed in all government premises at all major points of contact with the public:

#### *The Way of Excellence in Public Service*

We want to give you quality service

We are courteous and fair

We do our best to help

We have pride in our work

We want to keep improving

Feedback shows us where we can do better

Suggestions help us improve

Praise helps us work with a smile

We need your trust, support and co-operation for

*Excellence in Public Service*

A PS21 Hotline has also been set up to garner feedback from the public about the quality of service delivery.

It is clear from a range of examples that, far from impeding the business of government, the effort expended on encouraging openness, citizen participation and

improved customer service in the public sector reaps benefits that justify significant investments of time and money. Increased sensitivity to public demands and criticism facilitates the drive towards greater efficiency and, most significantly, identifies those areas most in need of reform. This is just as true for the core public sector as it is for privatised or state-owned enterprises.

Failure to invite public criticism will mean that service delivery can continue to run inefficiently and perform poorly without fear of reproach. Therefore, paradoxically, the most effective government departments are likely to be those which actively seek the most customer complaints. Governments need this pressure from its public in order to be sure that it is indeed the public interest that it is serving. Thus, although it may seem unhelpful initially, it will always ultimately be in the interests of government to set up mechanisms which facilitate public pressure on service delivery.