Water service providers in India are beginning to recognize the importance of consumer complaint resolution mechanisms that enable them to not only meet specific standards of service but to constantly raise these standards. To ensure that these initiatives are sustainable and do not remain standalone initiatives, such mechanisms must involve all key stakeholders in all stages of design and implementation.
Consumer voice mechanisms are key to improving services and to making the service provider more accountable, and help consumers in giving service providers useful feedback on the efficiency and effectiveness of their services.

Executive Summary

A crucial challenge facing India today is to rapidly improve the reach and quality of urban water supply and sanitation (WSS) services to all its people. In spite of increased investments in the sector, the provision of water and sanitation services has not adequately kept pace with the growing needs of the population. As a result, urban India is afflicted by severe deficiencies in the delivery of these two basic services. It is increasingly being recognized that at the heart of these difficulties are the institutional arrangements and associated incentives that characterize India’s urban WSS sector. Services are vastly deficient because of a lack of accountability of service providers to deliver ongoing improved services.

Consumer voice mechanisms are key to improving services and to making the service provider more accountable. Such voice mechanisms help consumers in giving service providers useful feedback on the efficiency and effectiveness of their services. The service provider thus is more accountable and responsive to customer needs and delivers services that are closer to customer expectations. Water service providers are increasingly realizing that crucial to successful performance is keeping consumers happy and delivering better services by designing and implementing consumer care programs, including consumer voice mechanisms and complaint redressal systems that address consumer concerns adequately, since these mechanisms keep consumers satisfied, help deliver services that are closer to consumer expectations, and encourage a higher willingness to pay for services.

This field note focuses on mechanisms that Indian water providers have developed through Citizen’s Charters, e-governance initiatives, citizen centers, and customer courts, and attempts at putting forth the lessons that these have to offer. A variety of mechanisms exist today in the country that include 24-hour customer care phone lines, Citizen’s Charters, various e-governance complaint redressal mechanisms, consumer courts, and water adalats (literally, courts) that not only help provide a means for consumers to voice their concerns with services being delivered but, at the same time, allow for regular and systematic feedback to the provider on the services that are being delivered. While developing some of the key principles, this field note also develops important lessons that must be borne in mind while designing such consumer voice mechanisms, so as to ensure their effective and sustainable implementation.

Context

Urban WSS utilities and service providers across India continue to suffer from severe deficiencies in services—poor availability, access and quality, and inequitable distribution to consumers. The impact of poor services is felt severely on all consumers through adverse health impacts, or through large coping costs that they incur on expensive and unsafe alternatives to deal with poor quality services.

It is being increasingly recognized that poor WSS services emanate from the lack of accountability of service providers to deliver ongoing improved services. Service providers have neither the autonomy to make rational operational decisions nor the fiscal compulsions to run their departments and operations in a viable and sustainable manner. The absence of role separation—between the regulator, the policymaker, and the service provider—has also resulted in a lack of clarity in roles. There is also a fair degree of political interference, even in day-to-day operational decisions, rather than a focus on setting targets for systemic improvements, sectoral policy, and operational performance against which utilities and service providers can be measured and held accountable.

One of the ways in which service providers can be made more accountable, responsive, and proactive to consumer needs are consumer voice mechanisms because these mechanisms demand that consumer needs are addressed and some specific standards of service are met by the service provider. It is true that only the end users, that is, the consumers, can
Box 1: The Criticality of Consumer Voice Mechanisms for Improving Services

The basic aim of the performance improvement series is to help water utilities and service providers understand and adopt mechanisms that promote cost recovery and sustainable revenue strategies, as well as help achieve financially viable and sustainable improved services. The objective is to be able to focus not only on specific performance improvement areas by advancing technical, commercial, and operational efficiency—such as leak reduction, billing and collection, customer service, and tariff setting, among others—but also ensure that such improvements remain sustainable and viable in the long term through arrangements such as performance agreements, monitoring, and evaluation.

This issue, No. 4 of the series, documents and analyzes various consumer voice mechanisms that have been implemented by urban local bodies/water utilities in India. These consumer voice mechanisms encompass some of the consumer feedback mechanisms and consumer complaint systems in India through which consumers express their satisfaction levels with the services being delivered. The objective is to be able to identify the key elements and processes that are essential pre-requisites for making such a mechanism effective and responsive to the needs of consumers. The field note:

- Traces the evolution of consumer voice mechanisms in India;
- Maps out the different types of consumer voice mechanisms;
- Studies specific cases of consumer voice mechanisms as implemented by urban local bodies and service providers; and
- Outlines major lessons for water utility managers for designing and implementing successful consumer voice mechanisms.

determine the type of services they find most relevant, convenient, and affordable. Consumer voice mechanisms can ensure that consumers communicate to the service provider their needs and expectations of services so that the delivery of WSS services is in a manner that compels service providers to become more accountable. Service outcomes and consumer satisfaction, thus, become the benchmarks for measuring their performance. Since keeping a consumer satisfied encourages a higher willingness to pay for services, providers are fast realizing that focusing on their consumer is very crucial.

Accordingly, some water service providers in the country have been exploring ways and means to improve services by getting their consumers to give feedback on services delivered so that they can understand and serve the consumer better through carefully designed consumer focused programs.

WSS providers in rural India have been focusing on this consumer element through demand responsiveness and community participation in the design, financing, and management of services.

In urban India, as will be discussed in subsequent sections, the focus has been on introducing changes through carefully designed consumer voice mechanisms that ensure that the consumer has a say in the effectiveness of service delivery.

Increasingly, consumer voice mechanisms are helping service providers receive important feedback on services delivered so that constant improvements can be made and services delivered are closer to consumer expectations.
Water supply and sanitation providers in urban India have been focusing on introducing services that are closer to consumer expectations through carefully designed consumer voice mechanisms.

**Consumer Voice Mechanisms and Their Relevance for Improving Services**

**What are Consumer Voice Mechanisms?**

Consumer voice mechanisms in this context include 24-hour customer care phone lines, Citizen’s Charters, various e-governance redressal mechanisms, consumer courts, and water adalats (or courts) that provide systematic feedback to the provider on services that are being delivered. Such mechanisms have helped service providers identify and review issues that affect the interests of consumers and at the same time ensure that they remain aware of, and responsive to, consumer concerns and complaints about their services.

Consumer voice mechanisms are typically set up as an interface between the consumer and the service provider, ensuring that all consumer requests regarding WSS services are lodged, tracked, and monitored from a single point. This in turn enables the creation of a centralized database that provides facts and figures about the service levels being provided, so that service deficiencies can be identified and the service provider can continuously improve the delivery of services. These mechanisms are often available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and provide consumers with the flexibility to lodge their service complaints according to their convenience. Such mechanisms are also sometimes backed with an efficient follow-up system for consumers to check the status of their requests. An effective tracking of consumer feedback improves response time for redressing service complaints and can bring about continuous improvements in services.

Such means for delivering consumer voice mechanisms are a marked change to earlier service complaint mechanisms in the country where service providers were not necessarily held accountable for redressing complaints in a timely manner. They were not backed with time lines that set in place by when complaints would need to be redressed nor with systems that checked on whether complaints actually got redressed. Consumers would have to lodge their service complaints with different departments responsible for the respective service; they often had to queue outside a small window, wait for long hours, make many visits, and be harassed by departmental bureaucracy and possibly corruption. This would eventually result in their dissatisfaction since complaints, if redressed at all, were redressed with varying response times and varying quality of service response.

**How do Consumer Voice Mechanisms Help in Improving Services?**

Consumer voice mechanisms include ways and means through which consumers can provide feedback to service providers on the services delivered on a regular and systematic basis and at the same time deliver improved services to match consumer expectations. Such mechanisms allow for constant consumer participation in services being delivered by allowing them to report and provide pointers on service deficiencies through formal mechanisms. With time, consumer voice mechanisms have ensured that providers pay greater care to consumers by allowing the latter to be able to receive quick, timely, and appropriate responses to any complaints that they may have about the quality of services.

**Consumer Voice Mechanisms and Improved Accountability**

Consumer voice mechanisms are a means for ensuring that service providers are more accountable, responsive, and proactive to consumer needs since such mechanisms demand that consumer needs are addressed and some specific standards of service are met by the service provider. No utility/service provider can claim to be accountable, responsive, and user-friendly unless it has established an accessible, efficient, and effective consumer voice mechanism including the means for receiving good feedback on services delivered. One of the five features of accountability1 as articulated in the World Development Report (2004) is ‘enforcing’ whereby citizens or consumers can provide feedback on provider performance and gauge their efficiency and effectiveness in delivering WSS services (Figure I). Consumer voice mechanisms ensure that this element of accountability is met because consumer feedback on services provided demands that service providers address the issues raised. Such mechanisms can ensure

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1. The five elements include: (a) Delegation: an explicit understanding that a service will be supplied; (b) Financing: providing resources to enable the service to be provided or paying for it; (c) Performing: supplying the service; (d) Informing: having information and evaluating performance against expectation and formal/informal norms; and (e) Enforcing: being able to impose sanctions for inappropriate performance and give rewards when performance is appropriate.
that service providers maintain a clear consumer focus and an ongoing commitment to constantly raise service standards and provide quality services that are closer to consumer expectations. Consumer voice mechanisms, hence, form a key component to any such customer relationship management that a service provider may be adopting. This is because such mechanisms help demonstrate a utility’s visible commitment to its consumer. It also helps in encouraging feedback from the consumer, which when regularly and proactively monitored helps in providing services that are closer to consumer expectations.

An analysis of consumer feedback data could help utility managers identify chronic complaint issues in specific geographical areas and address structural constraints associated with improvements in service performance. Such mechanisms help in bringing about continuous improvements in the operations of the provider, in improving productivity and performance, and hence in enhancing services. Consumer voice mechanisms also provide information on services that support the element of ‘informing’ in the accountability story. It also wins customer satisfaction that is important, especially in generating a willingness to pay among existing customers and in attracting new customers.

The field note undertakes a study (documentation and analysis) of various consumer feedback and complaint resolution mechanisms that have been implemented by various urban local bodies and water utilities across the country. The field note analyzes Citizen’s Charters, e-governance initiatives including complaint registration systems, citizen centers and online monitoring systems, water adalats and Citizen Report Cards to determine the elements and processes that are the essential pre-requisites for making a consumer voice mechanism effective and responsive to the needs of the consumer.

The following cases were studied:

- **Citizen’s Charters:**
  - Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board;
  - Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board;
  - Chandigarh Municipal Corporation;
  - Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad; and
  - Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai.

- **Complaint Registration Systems:**
  - Integrated service delivery: Parishkaram, Andhra Pradesh;
  - Centralized Complaint Center: Chandigarh Municipal Corporation; and
  - Interactive Voice Recording System of the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board.

- **City Civic Centers:**
  - Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation; and
  - Metro Customer Care, Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board.

- **Online Complaint Management Systems:**
  - Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai; and
  - Sahyog Kendra, Jamshedpur Utilities and Services Company.

- **Water Adalats:**
  - Bangalore and Hyderabad.

- ** Citizen Report Cards:**
  - Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Ahmedabad.

The field note undertakes a study (documentation and analysis) of various consumer feedback and complaint resolution mechanisms that have been implemented by various urban local bodies and water utilities across the country. The field note analyzes Citizen’s Charters, e-governance initiatives including complaint registration systems, citizen centers and online monitoring systems, water adalats and Citizen Report Cards to determine the elements and processes that are the essential pre-requisites for making a consumer voice mechanism effective and responsive to the needs of the consumer.
Key Principles of Consumer Voice Mechanisms

Organizational Culture to ‘Think Consumer First’

Having a clear consumer focus does not only mean establishing a consumer service cell or focusing on consumer relationship management. It is also about how the entire organization perceives and inculcates such a concept in its work culture so as to be able to provide the best quality of service for its consumer. It is about how the organizational culture and the departments, operations, systems, and procedures are geared on a day-to-day basis around the fundamental principle of ‘think consumer first’.

Understanding and Identifying the Consumer

In developing an effective consumer voice mechanism system it is very important that the service provider first understands and identifies its consumer.

Utilities and service providers will need to understand what it is that the consumer wants and how they can address these wants.

They will need to tailor their services to address consumers as those who are in receipt of an economic good as well as a social good. They will need to focus not only on consumers who pay their water bills on time but also on consumers who default on payments, on lost consumers, on recent consumers, on potential consumers, and on poorer consumers, for whom they may need to make special considerations.

Once the consumer is identified, the service provider will need to target specific consumer groups with appropriate service options and appropriate price levels. For instance, if the target group is poor people, the service provider will need to find innovative ways and means through which poor people can continue to provide feedback on the services delivered. This could mean having citizen centers and complaint cells located in areas where they reside, or having simplified complaint redressal cells that are easily understood by them.

Defining Service Standards through Citizen’s Charters

When developing an effective consumer voice mechanism, it is for the utility or service provider to have in place a mission statement that defines the task of the service provider—including the objectives of the water authority, the standards of service delivery that it commits itself to, the choices available for the consumers, the avenues for complaint resolution, a description of procedures (that is, for new connections, payment of bills, provision of meters, complaints registration, and so on), customer obligations, and other related information. This is typically done through Citizen’s Charters that explain in simple language what the consumer should expect from the utility and what the utility expects in return.

Citizen’s Charters are written declarations by governments or service providers of their commitment to citizens about the nature and standards of service that they are obliged to provide, including available avenues for appropriate redressal of complaints. Charters also sometimes set out details of complaint redressal systems along with the precise time frame within which the provider is obliged to redress grievances. A Citizen’s Charter clearly

Consumer voice mechanisms include 24-hour customer care phone lines, Citizen’s Charters, various e-governance redressal mechanisms, consumer courts, and water adalats that provide systematic feedback to the provider.
Performance Improvement Planning: Implementing Robust Consumer Voice Mechanisms

Box 3: Pre-requisites of a Citizen’s Charter

- **Agreed and published standards for service delivery**: Citizen’s Charters should lay out explicit service delivery standards that are time-bound, relevant, accurate, measurable, and specific.

- **Information on service delivery**: Citizen’s Charters should contain full and accurate information about services, quality standards to be expected, available channels for complaint redressal, and so on.

- **Choice and consultation with users**: Citizen’s Charters should provide choice of services to users wherever practicable. Involvement of consumer organizations, citizen groups, and other stakeholders in the formulation of Charters, specifically while setting service standards and complaint redressal standards, is critical to ensure that provisions meet consumer needs.

- **Provision of an effective complaint redress mechanism**: This is required to ensure effective handling of consumer complaints with information on:
  - When to complain and for what to complain;
  - Where to lodge the complaint (names and addresses of relevant officers and complaint offices);
  - How to complain (procedure for lodging a complaint, medium of registering complaints);
  - Formats for registering complaints; and
  - Time limit for response and redressal of complaints.

- **Courtesy and helpfulness**: Staff need to be trained so that they are courteous and helpful.

- **Assessment of service provider performance**: Standards of performance must be reviewed from time to time and the findings published and shared with citizens or users.


The concept of Citizen’s Charters was first articulated and implemented in 1991 by the Conservative Government in the United Kingdom under a national program aimed at enhancing service delivery standards and making the government transparent and accountable. The program was relaunched in 1998 and rechristened ‘Services First’ by the Labour Government. The United Kingdom’s Citizen’s Charter aroused considerable interest around the world (Box 4).

In India, Citizen’s Charters were initiated in 1997 with two conferences of Chief Secretaries of all states and union territories that mandated all national, state, and local government agencies to draft Charters. As of February 2007, central government agencies have formulated 115 Citizen’s Charters and state governments (including urban local bodies) and union territories have prepared 711 Charters. The Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, Government of India, has been entrusted with the task of coordinating, formulating, and operationalizing Citizen’s Charters in the country. State governments and union territory administrations have appointed nodal officers while central government departments and public sector undertakings have appointed a contact officer for effectively implementing, coordinating, and monitoring their respective Citizen’s Charter initiatives.

An assessment of Citizen’s Charters from four Indian cities (Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chandigarh, and Greater Mumbai) was undertaken to ascertain whether they met the characteristics of a good Charter (as demonstrated in Box 3). The assessment revealed that all Citizen’s Charters provide information on the basics for registering a complaint (Table 1). They must also be backed by appropriate complaint redressal mechanisms since this ensures that they are effective in meeting service standards.

In spite of detailed Citizen’s Charters, many of them (such as the one in

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2 A list of Charters formulated by central government agencies is found at http://www.goicharters.nic.in/charter.htm

3 A list of Charters by 24 states and union territories is found at http://www.goicharters.nic.in/charter-state.htm

5 This note studies Charters of the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board, the Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board, the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai.
Such mechanisms should be backed with an efficient follow-up system for consumers to check the status of their complaints, and an effective tracking of consumer feedback.

**Box 4: Citizen’s Charters Across the World**

The Commonwealth Government of Australia launched its Service Charter initiative in 1997 as part of its ongoing commitment to improve the quality of services provided by agencies to citizens requiring service providers to focus on services delivered, measure and assess performance, and initiate improvements.

The Government of Malaysia issued Guidelines on the Client’s Charter in 1993 to assist government agencies prepare and implement a Client’s Charter, which is “a written commitment by an agency to deliver outputs or services according to specified standards of quality” (Government of Malaysia, 1998).

The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat started a Service Standard Initiative in 1995 based on the Citizen’s Charters of the United Kingdom. It was implemented against the backdrop of citizen expectations relating to friendly, respectful, and courteous service, faster response times, extended hours at government offices, and ‘one-stop-shopping’.

6 Only the Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board commits in its Charter that in case of complaints (namely, no water supply, low pressure, and polluted supply) it will supply to customers 250 lpcd if the supply is not restored in two consecutive days.

Bangalore) remain ineffective because citizens are not aware of their existence (Box 5).

The assessment also compared the Citizen’s Charters to see if they were useful for ensuring provider accountability. To do so effectively, Charters must be citizen-friendly, simple, and easy to understand.

Again, when comparing this objective, the Charters met most requirements except the one on providing details about compensation payable to the complainant if the redressal received was not according to Charter standards (Table 2).

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**Table 1: Comparing the Effective Implementation of Citizen’s Charters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>When to complain</th>
<th>Where to complain</th>
<th>How to complain</th>
<th>Complaint format</th>
<th>Time lines for redressal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangalore Water Board</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyderabad Water Board</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandigarh Municipal Corporation</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Comparing the Usefulness of Citizen’s Charters for Ensuring Accountability**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Simple language</th>
<th>Small document</th>
<th>Available in English and local languages</th>
<th>Display at prominent locations</th>
<th>Compensation for nonadherence to commitments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangalore Water Board</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyderabad Water Board</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandigarh Municipal Corporation</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

6 Only the Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board commits in its Charter that in case of complaints (namely, no water supply, low pressure, and polluted supply) it will supply to customers 250 lpcd if the supply is not restored in two consecutive days.
Box 5: Bangalore’s Citizen’s Charters

A. ‘Our Customer Charter’, Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of complaints</th>
<th>Redressal time frame</th>
<th>Medium of complaint registration</th>
<th>Format of complaints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaks in water and sewage lines</td>
<td>1 day</td>
<td>Service station, assistant executive engineer’s office, executive engineer’s office, e-mail to chairman</td>
<td>Personally, written, phone or Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaks in house connections</td>
<td>2 days</td>
<td>To be undertaken by owners after taking permission from assistant executive engineer</td>
<td>Written application with road cutting permission from Bangalore Mahanagar Palike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water supply bills</td>
<td>15 days</td>
<td>Assistant engineer, assistant executive engineer, executive engineer</td>
<td>Personally or written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faulty meter, meter testing</td>
<td>7 days</td>
<td>Assistant executive engineer</td>
<td>Written application + Testing fee paid Receipt for US$0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delay in obtaining water supply and sewerage connection</td>
<td>3 days</td>
<td>Executive engineer, additional chief engineer (maintenance), chief engineer (maintenance)</td>
<td>Personally or written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cases of bribes, harassment, suspected contamination of water</td>
<td>7 days</td>
<td>Additional chief engineer (vigilance and quality assurance)</td>
<td>Written complaint</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Awareness about Citizen’s Charters in Bangalore

The awareness among citizens regarding Citizen’s Charters is very low, validated by the Third Citizen Report Card prepared by the Public Affairs Center, Bangalore. The report highlighted that the key elements of a Citizen’s Charter, namely ‘information and openness’, were missing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Awareness about Charter</th>
<th>Awareness about Charter’s contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangalore Electricity Supply Company</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Transport Office</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Effective Consumer Complaints Redressal and Consumer Feedback

Every Citizen’s Charter must be backed by an effective complaints redressal mechanism for ensuring that consumers’ voices are heard regarding services and that consumer complaints are handled successfully. Not only do such mechanisms ensure that the consumer has a means to be able to influence the quality of services, they also help service providers receive frequent and regular feedback from consumers on the quality of care and service delivery, and whether the service standards committed in the Citizen’s Charters are being adhered to.

This means that the water utility or service provider needs to provide a single point for complaint lodging and follow-up—all requests are lodged, tracked, and monitored from a single point of reference. Such mechanisms must have a convenient and reliable customer interface so that they are easy to understand and use by the consumer. The location of these delivery channels is equally important and should serve the entire service area. They should be located at prominent places that are convenient to access. Once the complaints registration and redressal mechanism has been set up, water utilities and service providers will also need to ensure that the response to consumer complaints is timely, effective, and efficient.

In India, there are now a multitude of mechanisms that address complaint resolution and feedback receipt. It was only in the late 1990s that water service providers started designing and institutionalizing mechanisms for complaint redressal. While some of the initiatives remain internal to the utility (and hence initiated and implemented by themselves or with others), others are external to the utility (and driven by external parties) and are primarily undertaken by the consumers themselves (Figure 2).

**Consumer Voice Mechanisms Internal to the Utility/Service Provider**

These initiatives have been designed by service providers and are internal to them. They could be implemented by the utility itself either on its own or in partnership with others including nongovernmental organizations, civil society organizations, and private parties. These include (a) e-governance initiatives; and (b) water adalats.

(a) E-governance initiatives include the strategic and systematic use of information technology by governments or service providers to improve their efficiency, transparency, accountability, and interface with citizens. Over the last few years, various tiers of government have increasingly been using technology to redesign business processes and restructure departments, as well as change the way they manage affairs, deliver services, and interact with consumers. E-governance initiatives include (a) complaint registration systems; (b) citizen centers; and (c) online complaint monitoring systems.

**Complaint Registration Systems**

- **Integrated service delivery models** provide citizens with the services of many government agencies or departments and businesses through one-stop shops. Integrated service delivery initiatives have a huge potential as an effective complaint registration and redressal mechanism due to their wide coverage of services, geographical spread, and large citizen and consumer reach. Such services are typically accessible.
from any location in the city round-the-clock, all year through, even on public holidays through a toll-free number at a call center. Citizens call the operator who then registers the queries or complaints on web-based applications and allot a reference number to the caller. Departmental functionaries can log on through a public Internet portal address and download details of all grievances received against their departments. Sometimes the details of the complaints received could be forwarded by e-mail and mobile alerts along with the reference numbers. The participating departments are expected to resolve complaints within the time frame stipulated in their respective Citizen’s Charters and update the database with details of the action taken. The call center sometimes also deals with pending cases and undertakes follow-up with concerned officers to clear pending grievances. In some cases the heads of the respective departments are also kept updated on pending grievances through e-mail and fax. (Box 6 elaborates on a specific integrated service delivery model.)

**Centralized complaint centers** are department or agency specific, providing all or a few citizen services. Such mechanisms could be implemented at different tiers of government (national, state, or local). In some cases, local governments have provided centralized centers solely for the registration of public complaints and grievances with these centers located at the headquarters or at the zonal or ward-level offices. Under such systems, citizens have to visit the complaint center to register their complaints. To make the service more accessible to citizens, some urban local bodies have also provided additional mediums for registration of grievances, for instance, dedicated phone lines and the Internet. One such example is the centralized complaint registration system of the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation (see Box 7) that covers complaints related to water supply, sewerage, storm water drainage, sanitation, and roads. Operators at the complaint centers note the complaint details and route it to the concerned officials.

**Box 6: Integrated Service Delivery Models—Parishkaram**

eSeva7 has a complaint registration component called ‘Parishkaram’ that enables citizens to register grievances and access information on all participating government departments of eSeva. The service is available round-the-clock through a call center via a toll-free number. The initiative commenced operations in July 2003 through an agriculture services helpline as a pilot project. Following its successful implementation, the **Government of Andhra Pradesh** extended the facility in February 2004 to all citizens by encompassing all major state government departments. Customers get in touch with the call center operator for registering queries or complaints on a web-based application. Departmental functionaries then log on through a public Internet portal address and download details of all grievances received.

**Box 7: Centralized Complaint Registration (Chandigarh)**

A centralized registration system was introduced by the **Chandigarh Municipal Corporation** in 1999. Citizens can register their complaints either by e-mail to concerned officers, by logging on to the Corporation’s web site, calling a dedicated phone number or personally visiting the complaint center at the Corporation headquarters. The complaint registration service is operational from Monday to Friday from 8 am to 8 pm. The initiative has well-defined standards and time lines for complaint redressal. The use of the system has, however, been very low—only 1,452 complaints were registered between May and November 2005, possibly due to limited access to only one center, limited working hours, no operation on weekends and holidays, and the absence of a system to track complaint status.

**With voice recording systems,** consumers dial a dedicated number of the department, agency or service provider, and register their complaints on service delivery issues that the system pertains to. The voice recording system guides the caller through the complaint registration procedure; the details recorded are subsequently transcribed by an operator and passed on to concerned field
officers either through voice calls or mobile messaging. Bangalore has a voice recording system for water supply services whereby consumers can lodge complaints (Box 8).

**Box 8: Interactive Voice Recording System (Bangalore)**

Under the Interactive Voice Recording System implemented by the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board, consumers dial a dedicated number of the water utility and register their complaints on all service delivery issues. Once the complaint is recorded, the system provides for an automatic reminder to the concerned field officer eight hours after the complaint was first forwarded for action. The system also has an auto escalation process—if a complaint remains unattended after 24 hours of registration, its details are forwarded to the public relations officer and chairman as a mobile message. The initiative, however, remains ridden with problems of connectivity as well as unclear and inaudible prerecorded messages. Only 1,051 complaints were registered between November 2005 and January 2006. Apart from difficulty in accessing the system, a large number of complaints continue to be lodged directly with concerned officials of the Bangalore Water Board, which may be due to people not being aware of this service.

Citizen Centers

In many Indian cities, local governments or water utilities have provided citizen services including complaint registration through citizen centers, the reason being that these are convenient for citizens to access. To ensure that services are easily accessible to all categories of consumers across the service area, citizen centers target improving service delivery and making the functioning of local bodies or service providers more efficient, transparent, and citizen-friendly. Such centers provide multiple options for registration of complaints including phone calls (helpline numbers or ward office contacts), letters or faxes or through the Internet.

Operators at the citizen centers note down the complaint details in a pre-designed format and allot a complaint reference number to the complainant. In case of online filing, complainants have to fill a complaint registration form, the details of which are automatically transferred to the database and directed to concerned officers. Citizens are given the facility of tracking their complaints either via telephone to the respective citizen center or by logging on to the local government’s or water utility’s web site and entering the complaint number. In some cases, the system also allows departmental heads to assess the number of complaints, the redressal time, and the details of action taken by frontline staff, as well as the number of

Citizen’s Charters are written declarations by governments or service providers of their commitment to citizens about the nature and standards of service that they are obliged to provide.
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Pending complaints. Examples of how citizen centers are used in Ahmedabad and Hyderabad are demonstrated in Box 9.

**Box 9: Citizen’s Centers (Ahmedabad and Hyderabad)**

The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation has since September 2002 set up 16 city civic centers in different zones of the city. The total cost of the project (excluding civil works) was US$6.25 million, which included the cost of computer hardware, communication equipment, and software development. The corporation’s own buildings were modified and converted into civic centers. These centers provide all citizen-related services including the filing of consumer complaints and grievances. The system also provides sufficient information to the department officials to assess complaint resolution and carry out monitoring of the complaints to see if they are being redressed on time. However, in spite of a Citizen’s Charter outlining time lines for resolving different types of complaints, there is no system at present that enables citizens to receive information on resolution time lines. The system also does not allow for automatic reporting to show whether pending complaints have exceeded the redressal time limits as set out in the Charter. As of February 2006, nearly 376,000 complaints were registered through the city’s civic centers, with an average of approximately 250 complaints per day. While approximately 93 percent complaints are resolved, there is no tracking of whether these were redressed within the Citizen’s Charter time lines.

The Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board introduced its Metro Customer Care in February 1999, which was catalyzed by a customer meet that targeted molding “Board employees to dedicate themselves to customer care”. The service is operational 24 hours, seven days a week, at the Water Board’s head office to receive and coordinate redressal of water and sewerage complaints as lodged by citizens via a specifically designated telephone number. Once a complaint is redressed, section staff are required to call Metro Customer Care operators to close complaints. The initiative has reduced complaint redressal time from seven or 10 days to four days.

Pending complaints. Consumers can register their complaints on any service delivery issue including property tax, octroi, dead animal removal, illegal construction, street lights, water, drainage, storm water drainage, roads and footpaths, public buildings, health, encroachments, and so on.

**Online Complaint Management Systems**

This is an attempt at fulfilling the twin objectives of complaint registration and effective resolution of the complaint. Such a service allows citizens to register service-related complaints through a variety of mediums including a dedicated phone line, personal visits, letters or faxes, and through the Internet. A unique complaint tracking number is allocated once the complaint is lodged. In some cases (such as in Jamshedpur, as indicated in Box 10), a date by when the complaint will be redressed based on the Citizen’s Charter is given to complainants once a complaint is filed, so that they can track the status of the complaint. All registered complaints are compiled on a
Some systems, such as e-governance initiatives and water adalats, have been designed by service providers and are internal to them. They could be implemented by the utility itself either on its own or in partnership.

### Box 10: Online Complaint Management Systems (Jamshedpur and Mumbai)

The **Jamshedpur Utilities and Services Company Limited** has set up a 24-hour complaint resolution center called Sahyog Kendra since November 2004 that puts in place a single point request lodging system for ensuring that all requests are lodged, tracked, and monitored on a centralized database. The entire operating area is divided into seven customer complaint zones. Customers call a single phone number for lodging complaints and are required to identify themselves by a phone number, a customer ID, and the location from where they are calling. The location is mapped on a geographic information system to any one of the seven consumer complaint zones. Customers also need to specify the details of the complaint (and its code as listed in the complaint booklet). The unique feature of this initiative is that once the complaint is registered, the consumer is given a Service Level Guarantee, which is the maximum time within which the respective service department will redress the complaint. The complaint is registered in a central database, after which a job card is created and sent to the concerned department employee or contractor for redressal. Once redressed, the job card must be filled by the consumers (indicating their satisfaction levels) and by the employee or contractor responsible for resolving the complaint. The job card is returned to the center so that the redressal of complaints can be monitored on a regular basis. The status of the complaint is tracked online to ensure that it is redressed within its Service Level Guarantee.

The **Online Complaint Management System** in Mumbai has been implemented by Praja in partnership with the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai and Nixel Technologies in April 2003. It covers all operations of the Municipal Corporation including solid waste management, drainage, storm water drainage, roads and traffic, repairs to municipal property, water supply, buildings, factories, licenses, pest control, and so on. Praja bore the software development and refinement costs, training costs of Corporation staff, as well as the ongoing operation and maintenance costs of web and database servers through support from its institutional donors; the Corporation took care of the costs of installing and upgrading all supporting hardware (computer and communications equipment) and expenses related to operation and maintenance (including support staff salaries and continuous Internet connectivity). No additional manpower costs were incurred as the excess manpower was organizationally redeployed in accordance with the needs of the new system architecture.

The system allows Mumbai residents to register service-related complaints through a variety of mediums including a dedicated phone line, personal visits, letters or faxes, and its web site on the Internet. A unique complaint tracking number and a date by when the complaint will be redressed based on the Corporation’s Citizen’s Charter is given to complainants once a complaint is filed, so that they can track its status. All registered complaints are compiled on a central data server, which then automatically distributes them to relevant ward offices for redressal on a real time basis. Action taken by ward officials is also recorded on the system. The Online Complaint Management System provides for the automatic escalation of a complaint in case it is not redressed within its time limit. Complaints that are not redressed on time are automatically escalated to higher officials. If still not resolved, the case reaches the municipal commissioner, from where it is passed on to department heads for investigation.

Despite its unique features, the use of the Online Complaint Management System remains low. Since its inception in 2003, the number of complaints is approximately 60,000 every year (64,309 in 2003; 61,931 in 2004; and 62,296 in 2005), with a low average of 172 complaints per day, which is relatively small for a city such as Mumbai. This is probably because awareness about the online complaint system has remained limited. Its low usage could also be attributed to the operation of a parallel complaint registration system under the Customer Facilitation Centers at the ward level.

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1. Jamshedpur Utilities and Services Company Limited is a wholly owned subsidiary of Tata Steel that was set up in August 2003 for improving the quality of civic services in Jamshedpur and providing, under one roof, integrated utility services including water, power, sewerage, drainage, and solid waste management.
2. The Customer Complaint Booklet contains a comprehensive listing of services provided by the Jamshedpur Utilities and Services Company according to eight heads classified as town electrical; integrated customer service; water management; planning, engineering, and construction; public health; fleet management; billing and customer care; and horticulture. These heads are further categorized and have respective job codes.
3. Hundred job cards are randomly selected and consumers are called to monitor and check if they were satisfied with the grievance redressal.
4. Some systems, such as e-governance initiatives and water adalats, have been designed by service providers and are internal to them. They could be implemented by the utility itself either on its own or in partnership.
5. Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai undertook an initiative to strengthen ward-level customer interfaces by setting up Customer Facilitation Centers as single window cells for all customer transactions (for example, bill payments, license applications, and so on), including complaint registration. The complaints are entered onto a communications-based software system called Complaints And Redressal and are subsequently manually sent to concerned departments for redressal.
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A central data server, which then automatically distributes them to relevant ward offices for redressal on a real time basis. The system may also record the action taken by ward officials.

**Water adalats** are convened between consumers and the utility staff to resolve long-standing issues and complaints. Consumers are usually informed about these adalats through all major English and vernacular newspapers. They are required to register their complaints or cases in advance so that the necessary information and documents can be collected from the concerned zone or circle of the water utility, which also ensures speedy complaint resolution. As indicated in Box 11, water adalats are usually used by utilities and service providers to resolve long-standing consumer complaints related to service delivery (no access to water supply, underground drainage, poor service quality), billing related problems (discrepancies in bills, nonreceipt of bill, irregular meter reading) or any other issue. Water adalats have ensured a

### Box 11: Water Adalats (Bangalore and Hyderabad)

**Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board**
- In 2004, nearly 204 water adalats were convened—771 cases were discussed, of which 762 were resolved and nine were pending.
- In 2005, nearly 224 water adalats were held in which 460 cases were heard, of which 432 were resolved and 28 were pending.
- The redressal efficiency is high (99 percent in 2004 and 94 percent in 2005).
- Cases worth US$250–US$625 are heard at these adalats.
- They were convened once a month on a pre-designated date at all its 20 sub-divisional offices.\(^9\)
- The adalats are chaired by heads of the Bangalore Water Board’s engineering division.

**Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board**
- Sixty-eight water adalats have been held till January 2006.
- Approximately 500 consumers have registered complaints of which 250 cases have been resolved at the central level and another 230 cases forwarded to the concerned division or circle for appropriate decision.
- Hyderabad Water Board convenes them on a monthly basis, on every first Saturday, at its headquarters in Khairathabad.
- They are convened by a three-member committee, including a sitting or retired city judge (as the chairman), one senior advocate, and one social worker from the Hyderabad Water Board. Concerned field staff are also expected to attend these adalats.

\(^9\) Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board has six divisions (North, South, East, West, Central, and South East); each division has the following sub-divisional offices—North (three), South (four), East (three), West (four), Central (three), and South East (three).
complaint resolution process that is transparent, easily accessible, more accountable, less discretionary, and highly effective in resolving complaints where other redressal mechanisms have failed.

**Consumer Voice Mechanisms External to the Utility**

The external initiatives are those driven by citizens and include Citizen Report Cards used for reporting on various aspects of service delivery.

**Citizen Report Cards** are used to obtain consumer feedback on satisfaction levels regarding various aspects of services. These tools have been used widely, internationally (as indicated in Box 12) and in India (as indicated in Box 13). They can be used by governments, civil society, development agencies or independent consortiums (government officials, civil society, and media) to record consumer voices through participatory methodologies (focus group discussions and sample household surveys with different population groups) on service related problems. The issues can then be communicated to service providers to ensure that service delivery is responsive to the needs of the consumer.

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**Box 12: International Applications of the Citizen Report Card**

- **Ukraine**: Four cities prepared Citizen Report Cards on their public services and had a public hearing, with the active participation of the city mayors.
- **The Philippines**: The Public Affairs Center provided support to the World Bank in preparing a Citizen Report Card on pro-poor public services in the Philippines.
- **Vietnam**: Provincial level applications of the Citizen Report Card have been attempted in Quang Binh and Haiphong provinces. These applications were an effort to improve public service delivery.
- **Sri Lanka**: An initiative supported by Transparency International applied the methodology for assessing the integrity of the judicial system in Sri Lanka.
- **Bangladesh**: A nongovernmental organization coalition carried out the Citizen Report Card exercise across several cities in Bangladesh in 2000.

Citizen Report Cards provide a reliable basis for systematic engagement, dialog, and partnership action by citizens, city governments, and civil society to improve upon service delivery. Citizen Report Cards are usually used to assess the performance of public services agencies from the citizens’ perspective and to see whether gathering citizens’ feedback could be effective in stimulating action. They provide important feedback on services for all agencies, which feeds into important service delivery improvements.

Citizen Report Cards can be used for many purposes:

- They can be used as a diagnostic tool that enables collection of qualitative and quantitative information from citizens on the adequacy, quality, and efficiency of
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Box 13: Citizen Report Cards in India (Bangalore, Ahmedabad, and Hyderabad)

Citizen Report Cards were initiated in India by the Public Affairs Center, a nonprofit organization in Bangalore in 1994. A series of focus group discussions with different population groups, and surveys from 803 general households and 327 slum households in the city, on service related problems were undertaken. The agencies included Bangalore Development Authority, Bangalore Mahanagar Palika, the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board, the Karnataka Electricity Board, Regional Transport Office, and Bangalore Telephones. Citizens were asked to provide feedback on (a) how satisfactory public services were from the consumer’s perspective; (b) what service aspects were satisfactory and what were not; and (c) what were the direct and indirect costs incurred by consumers for these services. Second and third Citizen Report Cards followed in 1999 and 2003, respectively, with an expanded sample size and considerably broadened scope, an analysis of which is presented in Table 3. Service providers used the results of these Report Cards to bring about improvements in services. For instance, the Bangalore Water Board addressed the concerns raised in the Report Cards and implemented service delivery improvements that subsequently resulted in increased customer satisfaction (Table 4).

A similar initiative in Ahmedabad was prepared by the Foundation for Public Interest in collaboration with SEWA, a membership-based organization working with urban poor women in the city, for assessing municipal services in the city’s 12 wards from the perspective of urban poor women. The findings indicated consumer dissatisfaction with water supply, sewerage, public toilets, and garbage disposal. It also indicated that about 26 percent women paid ‘speed money’ (US$1.25–US$2.5) to solve problems related to the lack, or poor quality, of public services. All findings were presented to the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation in the form of a Report Card. There was, however, no result, and this remained a one-time effort.

In Hyderabad the Administrative Staff College of India undertook Citizen Report Cards for assessing the satisfaction levels of citizens with the quality of public services so as to help providers identify gaps and areas for performance improvement. The agencies covered included the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad, the Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board, Andhra Pradesh Transco, the Post and Telegraph Department, and Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation. The exercise revealed more than 50 percent respondent dissatisfaction with public service agencies. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the Citizen Report Card influenced any service delivery improvements.

Basic services and facilities, as well as the problems they encountered in their interactions with governments or service providers.

- They can be used as an accountability tool revealing areas or instances where institutions or service providers have not achieved mandated or expected service standards.
- They can be used as a benchmarking tool for providing periodic benchmarks for monitoring performance.

Effective Follow-up and Monitoring Redressal of Complaints on a Systematic Basis

Once a complaint is registered by the consumer, it is vitally important that the service provider, department or agency makes sure that the complaint is addressed in a timely and proactive manner. It is also important that the service provider tracks whether this is actually happening and whether there is an improvement over time, in the time lines taken to address the complaint, through an effective complaint redressal monitoring mechanism. Some providers have monitored and used citizens’ or consumers’ feedback about their complaint redressal performance on a periodic basis. Such monitoring exercises usually assess provider performance in redressing complaints vis-à-vis standards outlined in the Charter and see if further improvements can be made to reduce the time frames indicated for complaint resolution.

The follow-up to the complaint lodging also includes the provision of an efficient follow-up system for customers to check the status of their requests, along with effective tracking of customer feedback for
Once a complaint is registered, it is vitally important that the service provider makes sure that the complaint is addressed in a timely and proactive manner.

Table 3: Comparison of Three Citizen Report Cards in Bangalore (1993–2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main purpose</td>
<td>Provide feedback to service agencies and articulate voice</td>
<td>AND engage with each service agency</td>
<td>AND engage with city-level coordinating bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope</td>
<td>Sample survey and reports to media, service agencies, and government departments</td>
<td>AND facilitate citizen-agency engagement</td>
<td>AND hold pre-survey meetings with agencies; post report meetings with coordinating bodies, and zonal citizen-agency interface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage</td>
<td>Area under city government; sample of poor and nonpoor households</td>
<td>(Same as first Citizen Report Card)</td>
<td>AND adjoining municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key findings</td>
<td>Quality of services extremely poor, high incidence of problems, low problem resolution rate, extensive corruption</td>
<td>Some improvement in service quality, problem incidence declines, problem resolution continues to be weak, corruption has not declined</td>
<td>Significant improvements in satisfaction with service, problem incidence declines sharply, resolution of remaining problems low—probably chronic issues, corruption reduced to problem pockets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response of agencies</td>
<td>Minimal response from service agencies; city government initiates state-citizen interface platform (Swabhimana)</td>
<td>More agencies begin to engage civil society, agencies start to use feedback tools, high level nonelected body to monitor services</td>
<td>Most agencies agree with findings, announcements of new initiatives to further improve services, discussions still in progress with some agencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 4: Citizen Report Card Feedback (Bangalore)

The Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board undertook the following in response to the Citizen Report Card initiative:

- Organized training programs for staff to become more client-oriented.
- Prepared a Citizen’s Charter in January 2002 articulating service commitments.
- Introduced a public grievance redress system (Intra Voice Recording System) for complaints.
- Streamlined and computerized billing systems to take care of excess billing complaints, introducing new software in September 2002.
- Participated in four open houses co-sponsored by the Public Affairs Center.

Customer satisfaction levels increased from four percent in 1994 (First Citizen Report Card) to 42 percent in 1999 (Second Citizen Report Card) to 73 percent in 2003 (Third Citizen Report Card).

continuous improvement of services and for improvements in response time for redressing complaints. In almost all cases of the e-governance complaint registration and resolution systems, consumers were given unique tracking numbers when they registered a complaint so that they could call back and check on the status of their complaint.

As indicated in Box 14, in some cases the data management system of the complaint redressal mechanism could generate reports on the exact performance of complaint redressal—these reports were then used as effective tools for performance monitoring of frontline staff. The systems also facilitated the management of some urban local bodies or service providers.
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Box 14: Effective Monitoring of Complaint Resolution (Hyderabad, Jamshedpur, and Mumbai)

Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board’s Metro Care Center has an innovative feature that ensures the effective redressal of complaints. The ‘Complaints Redressal Efficiency’ is tracked on a regular basis that helps monitor staff performance by calculating the percentage of complaints that are resolved within the service norms as outlined in the Board’s Citizen’s Charter.

Similarly, in Jamshedpur, the company’s customer center (that addresses the redressal of complaints) awards a Service Level Guarantee—the maximum time within which the respective service department will redress the complaint—to consumers when they are lodging a complaint. The Service Level Guarantees for water services complaints are defined in Table 5. The unit monitors actual performance against Service Level Guarantees or the time taken by the company to resolve complaints. It also monitors the Service Level Expectation or the average time a customer is willing to tolerate the problem.¹⁷ The purpose of tracking these indicators is for the customer center to be able to provide services that are closer to customer expectations by focusing on particular elements of operational inefficiency as identified through the service level indicators. For instance, for water management services, 62 percent complaints in 2006 were of the water wastage type, of which 31 percent complaints were due to overflow. This indicated to the company that it should focus on reducing water loss levels. The complaint monitoring mechanism also helped the company surpass its own target of 75 percent compliance within time for redressing complaints on water services by recording an 80 percent level.

The complaints data that are recorded by the Online Complaint Management System in Mumbai are used to generate status reports of departmental and ward level complaints.¹⁸ These reports facilitate the Corporation’s officials at various levels to monitor and manage quality of redress, identify chronic complaint areas, and address structural constraints associated with improvements in service performance. In others, in case a complaint was not redressed within the specified time frame, the complaint resolution system also allowed for an automatic escalation of the complaint to senior management so as to keep a check on frontline staff. Some providers also used feedback from the consumer themselves before closing a complaint, information on which was then later fed back to further influence service delivery improvements.

### Table 5: Service Level Guarantees for Water Management Services (Sahyog Kendra, Jamshedpur)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job type</th>
<th>Service Level Guarantee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overflow from overhead tank</td>
<td>3 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking water scarcity</td>
<td>3 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inlet pipe leakage coming from outside the house</td>
<td>3 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pipe leakage, burst outside the house</td>
<td>3 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sullage water, wastewater, back side drain</td>
<td>15 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning of overhead tank</td>
<td>3 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storm water, rain water, front side drain repair</td>
<td>15 days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


¹⁷ Constant customer feedback through job cards or from periodic surveys helps estimate the Service Level Expectation.
¹⁸ These are reported as number of complaints registered, breakup of complaints redressed, pending, and escalated.
¹⁹ The estimated average number of visits or enquiries decreased from 13 (pre-Online Complaint Management System) to four (as per 2003 Complaint Audit).
An effective consumer voice mechanism requires well defined Citizen’s Charters and a complaint redressal mechanism that has a convenient and reliable customer interface and an efficient follow-up system for tracking complaints.

**Emerging Lessons**

The case studies along with the principles of consumer voice mechanisms bring to light some key lessons for providers:

- Comprehensive Citizen’s Charters should be in place with well defined service standards for providing citizens with required information on services provided, procedures for seeking services, and complaint redressal mechanisms, along with associated complaint redressal time lines. The Charters should also be designed with adequate citizen participation if they are to truly voice the interests of the consumers. In some cases, for instance the Hyderabad Metro Water Supply and Sewerage Board and the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, these Charters undertook public consultations for understanding the needs of all concerned stakeholders (staff, citizens, and civil society) as well as for making them aware of the Charters themselves. Agencies in other cities, such as Bangalore, ignored this element, which eventually impacted the success of Citizen’s Charters as customers remained unaware of them.

- The case studies emphasize the need for an efficient complaint redressal system that could deliver what is being promised in Citizen’s Charters. As demonstrated through the case studies, service providers developed suitable delivery channels or modes for complaint registration, depending on their requirements for meeting this need. Various channels or mediums are currently being used across the country—complaint centers, phone helplines, citizen centers, integrated service delivery centers, and the Internet.

- While an efficient complaint redressal mechanism is important to ensure that consumers are at least able to voice their concerns with services, it is equally important that such mechanisms have a convenient and reliable customer interface:

  (a) Delivery channels need to be easy to understand and use, especially if they are e-governance initiatives. For instance, if the complainant is required to fill up a complaint form then this should be simple yet comprehensive and easy to fill. Forms could have drop-down
menus with multiple options for easy filing of complaints. Some providers facilitated this through easy-to-use Internet web sites where complaints could be lodged. Some also facilitated this through easily available customer complaint booklets that included all details on the complaint mechanism.

(b) The location of delivery channels, especially complaint or citizen centers, should be planned so as to serve the entire service area and should be located at prominent places that are convenient to access. Some Indian providers located these centers at the ward or subdivision level since these covered a reasonable geographical area, with ward offices located at a central point in the ward that consumers were well aware of.

(c) Current complaint redressal mechanisms are also well accepted because they replaced previous systems that required consumers to queue outside a small window, wait for long hours, make many visits, and be harassed by departmental bureaucracy and, possibly, corruption. They demonstrated the importance of customer convenience through the creation of 24-hour systems that were operational even on weekends and public holidays.

Some channels were appealing because they were comfortable and had waiting areas with basic facilities such as drinking water and toilets. Some channels also built a culture of courteous and helpful frontline staff.

(d) Complaint registration and redressal mechanisms, such as those of Jamshedpur, Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, and Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, also demonstrated the importance of giving a tracking number when the complainant lodged a complaint. This facilitated customers to call back and track the status of their complaint without having to actually visit the center.

(e) Some cases, such as those in Jamshedpur and Mumbai, demonstrated the importance of a complaint registration and redressal mechanism that made a commitment to the complainant on the time frame for redressal. While service standards were detailed in Citizen’s Charters, they were actually implemented through
mechanisms such as the Service Level Guarantees and Service Level Expectations to see if grievances were being redressed within the time limits.

- Effective complaint registration mechanisms, especially those such as the e-governance initiatives, require good data management systems that have robust backend processes:

  (a) Complaint registration mechanism must be a computerized system in which all service nodes of the complaint or civic center are connected to a centralized server or database. This will ensure that there are no leakages of complaints from secondary and informal mechanisms including complaints registered at the ward level, or those registered with elected representatives or with concerned officials.

  (b) Most cases confirmed that a centralized database should be based on a data management system that allows for an automatic forwarding facility for complaints to the concerned frontline officer. Complaints should be forwarded on a real time basis and not at the end of the day.

  (c) This centralized database system could also serve as a management information system that automatically generates reports on registered, redressed, and pending complaints. This could help the service provider, agency or department to monitor the progress of complaint redressal on a continuous and systematic basis.

  (d) E-governance redressal mechanisms must be backed with robust backend processes. Appropriate technologies to support service requirements (24-hour access, good response times to queries) should be deployed with alternative connectivity and power supply solutions. The information technology architecture should offer
a high level of security and privacy and, at the same time, be scalable, to permit the integration of new user interface devices, application modules, and distributed servers.

- The case studies indicated that successful consumer redressal mechanisms were ones that were backed by strong monitoring mechanisms. In fact, in many cases, good mechanisms in place of complaint registration were not necessarily backed by effective monitoring systems for tracking complaint redressal within the Charter time lines, which is why their effectiveness is debatable:

(a) Some providers monitored and provided feedback to citizens or consumers on their complaint redressal performance. Such monitoring exercises were periodic and assessed provider performance in redressing complaints vis-à-vis standards outlined in the Charter. Some cases indicated that the data management system generated reports on the exact performance of complaint redressal, which were then used as effective tools for performance monitoring of frontline staff. The systems also facilitated the management of some urban local bodies or service providers to monitor and manage quality of redress, identify chronic complaint areas, and address structural constraints associated with improvements in service performance.

(b) Some of the cases demonstrated the importance of a monitoring mechanism that sought customer feedback before closing a complaint, such as in the case of Jamshedpur. Other cases, as in Bangalore, used Citizen Report Cards for customer feedback on services provided, which later fed into service delivery improvements.

(c) Others were facilitated through a process of automatic escalation of nonredressed complaints to higher tiers—a system that ensured that there would be pressure on frontline officers to perform and redress complaints within the specified time frame.
Indian water service providers are fast recognizing the importance of consumer complaint resolution mechanisms that enable them to not only meet specific standards of service but to constantly raise those standards. They are finding such mechanisms useful since constant consumer feedback about their services helps them identify and review issues that affect customer interests so that they can refine and deliver services closer to customer expectations.

To ensure that these initiatives are sustainable and do not remain standalone initiatives, such mechanisms must involve all key stakeholders in all stages of design and implementation, especially political representatives and frontline staff.

Since elected representatives serve as important conduits for citizen grievances in their constituencies, their marginalization could lead to lower levels of public acceptance and use.

At the same time, frontline staff would also need to own the mechanism if these mechanisms are to provide speedy redressal as per service standards.