Traditionally, efforts to tackle the challenge of accountability have tended to concentrate on improving the supply side of governance using methods such as political checks and balances, administrative rules and procedures, auditing requirements, and through formal law enforcement agencies like courts and the police. These top-down accountability promoting mechanisms have met with only limited success in many countries – despite developing. Increasingly, attention is being paid to the demand side of good governance, that is, to strengthening the voice and capacity of citizens (especially poor citizens) to directly demand greater accountability and responsiveness from public officials and service providers.1

There are very few opportunities for citizens, especially the poor, to participate in local government systems, even after many government initiatives and reforms. Thus, one of the important challenges that the millennium faces is to find successful and effective ways for government bodies and authorities to engage with the public, thereby increasing participation in an appropriate manner. In the case of urban services, there is growing consensus that citizen engagement can play a role in demanding greater responsiveness, accountability and transparency from service providers through watchdog committees, consumer courts, citizen report cards, right to information or freedom of information acts, public interest litigations, and other mechanisms.2

Under the project Democratizing Urban Governance: Promoting Participation and Social Accountability (DUG: PPAS), PRIA has begun addressing issues related to participatory governance and social accountability in select medium sized towns in India with a focus on state and national level policy advocacy. The project aims to enhance citizens'/ access to information and basic services through strengthening citizen engagement in the municipal decision making process. This issue of PRAKRIA illustrates few such initiatives undertaken in this project that have aimed at facilitating the voice and space for citizen participation in urban governance by exacting accountability to the level / standard of services that should be provided by city governments.

We curse it for traffic jams, power outages, potholes in the middle of the road, long queues for paying bills, and praise it for its opportunities, infrastructure and entertainment.


Rapid urbanization is coupled with the fact that nearly half of the world’s population is under the age of twenty-five, 1 and 85 per cent of the working age population lives in the developing world.2 There is growing youth unemployment, changes in family patterns, increasing income disparities, increasing migration, the impact of AIDS and HIV, and the virtual exclusion of large sections of the population living in informal settlements or stigmatized neighbourhoods. Young people are especially vulnerable to such problems because they often do not have access to decision-making forums. We need to strive, therefore, for truly inclusive cities, which allow for the participation of all stakeholders in matters that affect their present and future well-being.3

To promote purposeful engagement of the youth in our governance structure, it is important we focus on youth-led development and youth mainstreaming. It helps to recognize youth leaders in their communities and develop their capacity and interest in contributing to decisions that affect their lives.

Sports is a medium which gives opportunity to the youth to grow physically, socially as well as emotionally, and a platform to connect them with the city in which they live. With a view to engaging the youth in local government decision-making and to foster civic participation of the younger generation, PRIA and Nav Manas Kalyan Samiti organized a football match in Biharsharif, Bihar, India. The purpose of the event was to bring citizens and local government officials together on a common platform to exchange their views on their city. The event received wide media coverage.

Various issues were raised and discussed. The youth demanded that the municipality contribute to the development of sports by ensuring the maintenance of playgrounds, stadia and pools, and by involving a larger number of youth in sports activities, besides supplying the required quality of sports equipment. They asked for competitions of popular sports to be organized on the local and state levels. They suggested that town planning rules should not merely provide for play fields, sports fields, vayamshalas (recreation spaces), gym, etc, in newly developed areas at the planning stage. City plans should also protect and maintain existing infrastructure from encroachment. They expressed their concern over the state of their city’s environment and the delivery of municipal services.


3 Youth in Urban Development: Shaping Ideas into Action World Urban Forum Dialogue Series – Youth in Cities, Children, Youth and Environment Center, University of Colorado, USA.
Under PRIA’s project on promoting participation and social accountability in urban governance, the perception of citizens on the level of service delivery provided by the public agencies was shared at city level meetings in Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh) and Biharsharif (Bihar).

A city-wide citizen report card (CrC) survey was conducted in all the wards of the two cities covering a sample size of 2000 respondents. The survey assessed the level of basic services like water supply, sanitation (focusing on sewerage, drainage and solid waste management), and transport infrastructure. A component of safety was also included to get a comprehensive view of the quality of life as experienced by citizens. The CrC measured services in terms of their accessibility, quantity available, quality, frequency, timing, expenditure incurred and the ways/level of grievance redressal available. This helped both the supply side (concerned government agencies responsible for delivering services) and demand side (concerned citizens, CSOs, academia, media) to put forward their concerns and prioritize the issues to be tackled. Regular feedback from citizens is of utmost importance to improve levels and efficiency of service delivery.

The Bilaspur and Biharsharif sharings of the City Issue Papers were instrumental in getting a host of suggestions: on the appropriate planning and laying out of these services; the need for participatory planning so that the citizens can access these services without any delay or difficulty; construction of public latrines at accessible distances from poor households, with adequate water, electricity and doors in order to provide safety, especially for women and children; and efficient garbage disposal system. The event was also a platform to raise awareness about the Right to Information (RTI) Act among the participants so that they could use it effectively in cases of negligence or non-redressal of their complaints.

Organizing sharings gives all stakeholders an opportunity to express their concerns and suggest solutions. Such events certainly highlight a wide range of issues that can then become the focus of further discussions with different stakeholders at intermediate and local levels of government. They provide indicators that can trigger studies and help to strategize internal reform especially in the context of grievance redressal services at the municipality. Regular interventions can also help to develop service level benchmarks and track improvements in service standards.