

# THE GOVERNANCE BRIEF

## Grievance Redressal Processes in Urban Service Delivery:

### How Effective Are They?

By Malini Ranganathan<sup>1</sup>

**“We have been reduced to standing around as beggars and waiting for water late into the night. But it has not come for the past 3 months now.”**

Resident of Bommanahalli in Bangalore  
quoted in *The Hindu*, 12 April 2007

**“Road repairs hardly take place. Poor quality work puts the roads back in the same old condition in a few days time.”**

Resident of Nagarbhavi in Bangalore  
quoted in *The Times of India*, 18 January 2006

**“This smell is unbearable. I appeal to the health inspector concerned to do a spot inspection. The place is teeming with garbage. Please do the needful.”**

Resident of Bommanahalli in Bangalore  
who filed a complaint with the municipal office  
on 1 November 2006

Although the quotes above are all from residents living in peri-urban Bangalore, such complaints are common across several developing cities. Faced with inadequate or poor quality infrastructure services, citizens often turn to different channels to make their grievances heard. These range from formal routes provided by the local government or utility, such as a complaints hotline or an om-

budsman, to more informal avenues including elected representatives, neighborhood associations, media, and, in some cases, public protests. Recently, development agencies and domestic governments have been focusing attention on institutionalizing tools, legal channels, and public spaces for grievance redressal, often as part of larger programs for governance reform. Through its “Access to Justice” program, for instance, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has been helping strengthen administrative and judiciary channels for the poor to improve governance and reduce poverty (ADB 2001a; ADB 2001b; ADB 2006). An increasing number of municipal governments and utilities in developing cities are putting in place formal grievance redressal mechanisms that aim to hold government officials and public and private service providers to account. However, an analysis of these systems’ effectiveness is still insufficient—that is, whether service providers are responsive or not; whether such systems are accessible to the urban poor; and how effective they are vis-à-vis the more informal and political channels—particularly for the poor and marginalized—in bringing about greater accountability.

The purpose of this brief is to examine experiences to date with institutionalized or formal complaint management tools related to municipi-

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Residents waiting for their turn at a community "mini" water tank in Bangalore

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pal services such as drinking water, street lights, garbage removal, and sanitation. Complaint management involves the direct relaying of citizens' grievances about an urban service to a utility or municipal agency and the follow-up response by the individuals responsible. This brief considers the risks involved in formal complaint management systems such as exclusion of certain groups, or prioritization of the complaints of certain groups over others.

Section II reviews the rationale underlying grievance redressal and the reasons for its recent emphasis in reform agendas across developing cities. Section III provides a range of examples of various formal and informal complaint avenues and their relative efficacy. Section IV is dedicated to the workings and challenges related to complaint management mechanisms using the example of two case studies. The final section ends with some considerations for further thinking and design of grievance redressal mechanisms for improved and more equitable urban service delivery.

### Rationale for Institutionalizing Grievance Redressal Mechanisms

It is widely recognized that efforts to reduce poverty should not simply involve improving material conditions, but also involve enhancing access to the judiciary, police, public administration systems, and institutions charged with ensuring justice. While service delivery is being decentralized globally by devolving responsibilities to local

governments, little attention has been given to decentralizing access to and delivery of justice, and establishing effective grievance redressal procedures (ADB 2006).<sup>2</sup>

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 (WSP 2007). Several arguments support the scaling up of formal mechanisms to redress complaints over urban resources. First, monitoring by consumers or beneficiaries of an urban infrastructure project helps ensure that infrastructure projects stay on track, and provide a check on environmental damage, project expenditures, and timelines. Second, and frequently invoked in the context of reforms, important economic arguments underlie the need to ensure feedback to service providers of infrastructure sectors exhibiting natural monopoly characteristics. For substitutable commodities or where multiple suppliers exist, the volume of demand is a clear metric of satisfaction, and customers can relatively easily switch to another commodity or service provider if they are unsatisfied and if other options exist. But often water, sanitation, electricity, and other network infrastructure services that exhibit natural monopolies and economies of scale—that is, a single supplier is more viable than several smaller suppliers—have very few substitutes. As such, it is imperative that monopoly suppliers are effectively regulated to ensure universal coverage. There is also an expectation that at the point of use, the citizen knows best and can therefore provide the best "quality control" monitoring (ADB 2002: 19). Thus, it is often claimed that by tapping the synergies that exist between providers and citizens, the latter can "co-produce" the services that are of consequence to them (Ostrom 1996).

The concept of accountability has several interpretations. How one chooses to define and understand accountability has a bearing on the approach advocated for complaint management and, more broadly, urban reforms. For some authors, the promotion of accountability by international development agencies has fallen in line with standard prescriptions associated with the new public management—an apolitically conceptualized style of governance wherein gov-

<sup>2</sup> Justice is understood as a function of the relationship between institutions responsible for delivering public goods and services predictably, affordably, and accountably, and the ability of the poor to secure and sustain their access to key sets of assets (ADB 2001b).

ernments are encouraged to act more like private businesses and entrepreneurs, and provide incentives and rewards for improved organizational and individual performance (Kaboolian 1998). World Bank's distinction between the "long" and "short" routes of accountability is in this vein. In this framework, citizens are encouraged to exert "client power" to directly demand accountability from public or private service providers, rather than rely on the more traditional, long-winded chains of accountability through political actors (World Bank 2004; World Bank 2007). Institutionalized complaint management, i.e., direct interaction with service providers through the use of technology is one approach to enhance customer leverage. Goetz and Jenkins, on the other hand, identify accountability fundamentally as relationships of power, and further suggest that there are often differences between de facto and de jure lines of accountability. That is, "in the real world, there is very often a difference between whom one is accountable to according to law or accepted procedure, and whom one is accountable to because of their practical power to impose a sanction (Goetz and Jenkins 2002: 6)."

Using this definition, it is clear that there are barriers to the accessibility and efficacy of formal systems of grievance redressal and the types of direct routes to accountability advocated by international development agencies, especially for the poor. For instance, the poor may lack property rights or the capabilities and connections to access formal systems. They may also be too geographically isolated or too time-constrained to be able to formally register and follow-up on their complaints. Conversely, service providers may face institutional, financial, and human resource barriers that hinder their responsiveness. In majority of cities in Asia, the poor depend on more informal grievance redressal procedures involving local politicians, street leaders, lower level bureaucrats, and neighborhood associations. To Benjamin (2004), these "politics by stealth"—the types of everyday negotiations that the poor engage in to improve access to urban services—are significant. He argues, "the poor, like other groups, work city systems, institutions and politics (Benjamin 2004: 183)" and it is such processes that ultimately provide voice to the poor. These processes should therefore not be so easily dismissed as "patronage" or "vote bank" politics as they so often are in development circles. The following section reviews several current approaches to and channels for grievance redressal in urban infrastructure services.

## How Do Citizens Complain About Urban Services?

Several utilities in Asian cities now dedicate a telephone "hotline" or call center for complaints regarding service disruptions. Sometimes hotlines are used in conjunction with helpdesks where citizens can file complaints in person. More recently, utilities have launched websites through which users can report problems online. Known as online complaint management or e-grievance redressal, the use of the Internet to connect citizens and the government, or citizens and service providers is becoming increasingly popular. It also aligns with a larger trend of promoting the use of information and communication technologies for development. As discussed below, the efficacy of e-grievance redressal depends on several factors, including pre-existing accountability relationships, incentive structures, and regulatory oversight.

Although these telephone hotlines exist in theory, in practice, it is common to find them out of order or too backlogged with complaints to be effective. Similarly, those who do have access to the Internet rarely have confidence that their complaint will be registered and attended to when filed through websites—as is frequently the case in India. The regulatory framework that generally specifies the quality and type of grievance redressal procedure is known as a "citizen's charter." Citizen's charters developed globally in the 1990s as a contract that intended to reengineer the relationship between the state and citizen into one that best resembled the relationship between a business and its customer. As Haque (2005) describes, the main components of such a charter (known variously as "service standards initiative," "quality charter," or "service charter") include a description of the standards that should be expected from government, the performance indicators that can be used to assess service delivery, the individuals responsible for providing services, and the mechanisms or procedures available to express customers' grievances or complaints. While such compacts provide citizens with clearer expectations of the state, critics of citizen's charters caution that—particularly in highly exclusionary societies such as India—citizen charters do not cater to the needs of the poorest. Moreover, it is telling that while the Government of India adopted citizen charters in 1997 to increase transparency and accountability—in line with standard prescriptions of "good governance"—it has also gradually reduced expenditure on public health and education as a percent of gross domestic product, which was already very low (Haque 2005).

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## Aside from institutionalized mechanisms, citizens use informal or non-institutionalized mechanisms to complain, stake claims, and negotiate access to urban resources and services

Citizens also use legal routes for more serious grievances. Several governments have appointed an ombudsman to prosecute public officials and public corporations on behalf of citizens on a broad range of issues, including grievances related to the environment and public utilities. More frequently, ombudsmen pursue complaints about corruption and malpractice in government. In India, public interest litigations allow citizens to file cases on issues that affect the wider public. For instance in Delhi, this process led to new regulations on vehicular pollution and solid waste management (World Bank 2007). While the courts may be the most enforceable option to demand action from service providers, citizens rarely resort to them for day-to-day civic issues, given the resources and time required to file cases. The table below lists some typical avenues of formal grievance redressal procedures.

Aside from institutionalized mechanisms, citizens use a variety of informal or non-institutionalized mechanisms to complain, stake claims, and negotiate access to urban resources and services as mentioned above. Media plays an important role in raising public awareness about progress on and neglect of urban infrastructure. For example, newspapers frequently publish and highlight local and neighborhood civic issues in Bangalore, Mumbai, and Delhi. Print media often serves as an interlocutor between citizens and public officials, although it is not officially designated to do so by the government.

Aside from media, several citizen-led and more localized approaches to grievance redressal exist in cities around the world, including neighborhood groups, such as barangay (neighborhood) associations in the Philippines and resident welfare associations (RWAs) in India. In some cases, formal processes allow citizens to interact with the government as with the *Bhagidhari* ("participation") program in New Delhi, or with the Philippines Local Government Code of 1991 which mandates a role for the barangay government. Institutionalizing roles for neighborhood associations, however, runs the risk that only certain wealthier and better-connected associations will benefit, as is the case in Delhi because of the terms of participation (for instance unauthorized colonies cannot participate in Delhi's *Bhagidhari* program).

In general, the main roles of neighborhood associations are to report public works problems that directly inconvenience residents, and, on occasion, to raise funds to finance these works. Because of the type of residential areas in which RWAs in India are usually established, this type of activism is generally associated with the middle and upper classes. In Bangalore, for instance, the citizens' and volunteer group Janaagraha liaises with several RWAs to build awareness regarding ward-level grievances and encourage involvement in resolving them. Another organization in Bangalore, the Citizens' Voluntary Initiative for the City (CIVIC) organizes monthly grievance redressal forums in which representatives of major agencies such as the Bangalore water board, electricity utility, and the municipal corporation, are present to listen to the grievances of residents. Both Janaagraha and CIVIC liaise with many RWAs and are well known for their initiatives among their members. Over the past decade, Bangalore has witnessed several such examples of proactive citizen engagement in civic affairs (Heitzman 2004; Kamath 2006; Nair 2005; Paul 2002). But the extent to which such efforts

### Examples of Institutionalized Grievance Redressal Processes

Example	How it Works
Public hearing by utility agencies	Usually held once a month in neighborhoods (e.g., monthly water "courts" held by the water board in Bangalore, India) in which the public is invited to voice grievances against the utility. Regulators, engineers, and divisional management staff generally attend. A drawback is that these may not be so widely attended, or may over-represent the interests of particular groups of residents.
Ombudsman	An ombudsman (often a government official) is appointed to receive and investigate complaints about public officials or services provided by public agencies. Electricity and water agencies frequently have ombudsmen.
Complaints telephone hotline/e-grievance systems	Complaints received by a telephone hotline or through the Internet are relayed directly to the field engineers responsible. Drawbacks are that the hotlines or web pages may not be accessible to everyone, or that information about a complaint does not get transferred appropriately.
Public interest litigation	Public interest litigations involve cases introduced by the court itself, not necessarily the aggrieved, related to issues of public interest. One advantage is that since victims may not have the necessary resources to file a case themselves, the court takes on this burden on their behalf. Evidence on the effectiveness of public interest litigations in dealing with urban service issues is limited.

have benefited the lower classes, especially those located on the periphery of the city, is negligible. In these areas, where civic amenities are often wholly inadequate or absent, some grievances, including those concerning land and tenure, ration cards, and voter identity cards, are often channeled through political entities such as elected representatives or organizations with political agendas. It is therefore important to note that multiple informal or citizen-initiated channels of negotiation and complaints exist in Bangalore and other cities, and that these are often dependent on social class, income, and geography.

## Case Studies

### Municipal Grievance Redressal in Karnataka State

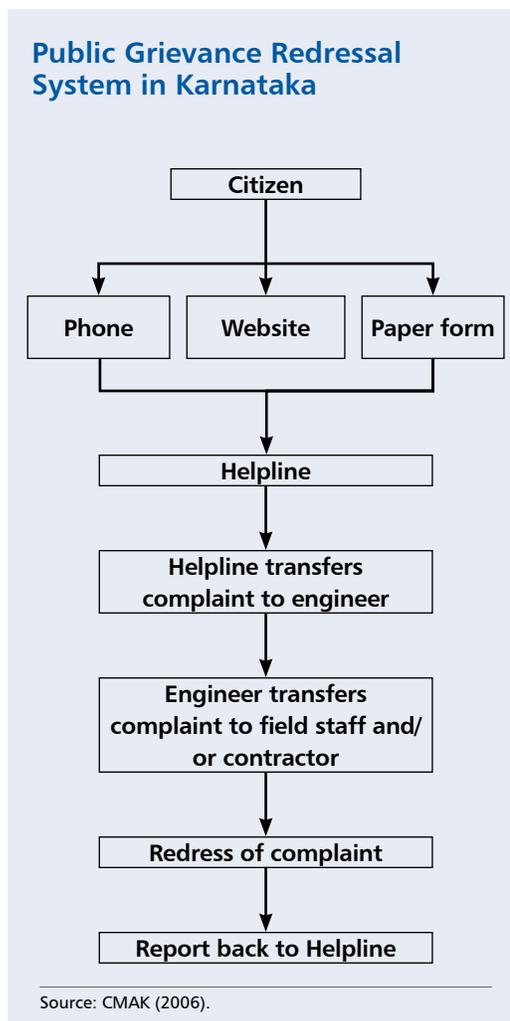
As part of a statewide municipal reform program covering 57 cities, in 2005 the Department of Municipal Administration of the Government of Karnataka launched a web-based application for citizens to file grievances relating to a variety of municipal services known as the “public grievance and redressal (PGR)” module. For each of these cities, the PGR system is linked to a municipal website that provides services such as information on city finances, contact information for city officials and politicians, Geographic Information Systems (GIS)-based property information, and applications for birth and death certificates. Notably, the web version of the PGR module is in both Kannada and English. The Urban Development Department, the Survey of India, and the e-Governments Foundation (a public interest organization) jointly implement these reforms and technology applications.

The PGR system is intended to work in the following way: in every municipality, the urban local government has set up a helpdesk and telephone helpline to collect and respond to complaints in a centralized manner, and appointed a nongovernment organization (NGO) to staff the helpdesk. When residents have a problem such as disruption in water supply or blocked underground drainage, they have four options for reporting this grievance: by personally visiting the helpdesk, by phoning the helpdesk, by submitting a letter to the helpdesk, or by lodging a complaint through the city’s new website. Thus, while the system has a web interface, it is accessible to users through avenues other than the Internet.<sup>3</sup> The helpdesk then logs these complaints into a logbook, and

relays them to frontline engineers who are supposed to resolve the problem within a stipulated time frame and report back the status of the problem. At the end of the day, the helpdesk staff is supposed to log all complaints in the PGR database (see figure).

The system is thought to build accountability because it provides real-time information about the problems experienced by residents and also sets a time limit within which grievances must be resolved. PGR also provides reports and maps summarizing the number of complaints made in a particular category or in a particular ward for anyone who has access to the Internet to review. Citizens can register complaints in several categories: those related to engineering (e.g., broken streetlights), those related to health (e.g., absence of garbage collection), and those related to various administrative affairs. The majority of complaints are

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<sup>3</sup> Because of the low penetration rate of computers and the Internet in India, it is not surprising that more residents file complaints in person, by telephone, or in writing than through the Internet.

The very poor often use more informal mechanisms to voice demands, such as through their ward councilor, by making group visits to the assistant executive engineer's office, through a local civic welfare association, or through field engineers on their inspection visits. These informal reports do not usually get recorded in the PGR system—raising questions about who the system caters to and how representative the data is.

filed in the first two categories, and within these, broken streetlights, leaking water pipes, blocked sanitary systems and storm water drains, and lack of garbage collection are the most frequent sources of complaints across the municipalities.<sup>4</sup>

In reality, although the PGR module was successful at raising awareness among citizens about the existence of the helpdesk, several challenges hinder its efficacy. These can be understood in terms of the institutional set up of municipalities. All infrastructure works, from the digging of borewells, to the maintenance of streetlights, are tendered out to local private contractors. Because tenders are often poorly drafted and enforcement of contracts is weak, contractors often do not honor their responsibilities, leaving several burned-out borewell motor pumps or silted-up drains, among other problems.

That is, regardless of how sophisticated the grievance redress system is, citizens continue to suffer from inadequate quality of services because of weak contractual enforcement. Moreover, as discussed above, the very poor often use more informal mechanisms to voice demands, such as through their ward councilor, by making group visits to the assistant executive engineer's office, through a local civic welfare association, or through field engineers on their inspection visits. These informal reports do not usually get recorded in the PGR system—raising questions about who the system caters to and how representative the data is. Another shortcoming of the PGR system is that NGOs and RWAs did not have access to nor demand the data to track the major problems in the area. In general, community-based organizations had very little involvement or awareness in reviewing the grievance redressal mechanism and providing feedback on its usefulness. Finally, elected officials also had little involvement in implementing the grievance redressal module and in monitoring the data. The lack of involvement of councilors has been recognized as a serious problem in Mumbai: "Given that elected representatives serve as important conduits for citizen grievances in their constituencies, particularly the urban poor who face barriers in accessing other formal channels, their nonsupport is likely to lead to less than optimal public acceptance and utilization levels [of online complaint management systems] (World Bank 2007)."

In sum, Karnataka's PGR system is a promising first step to institutionalizing grievance redressal in municipalities. The benefits could be significant, particularly in that it could provide vital data for infrastructure problem identification, and a streamlined way to handle complaints across neighborhoods. Currently however, some important limitations need to be addressed if the system is to be scaled up across the state and country.

#### Manila Water's Customer Complaint Management System<sup>5</sup>

The second case describes a different kind of system—an outsourced call center set up by the private water utility Manila Water to receive and process customer complaints related to water supply. Manila Water is one of two private concessionaires responsible for delivering water to Manila, and its primary jurisdiction is eastern Manila. The utility has two primary modes of delivering water to residential customers: through individual connections, and through third party bulk water sellers who buy water from Manila Water at industrial rates and then on-sell the water to households in communities. About 50% of customers are served through the mode, known as the *Tubig Para Sa Barangay* (TPSB) or "water for the community" program. TPSB was developed by the utility shortly after privatization in 1998 to reduce nonrevenue water, while also meeting the coverage targets stipulated in the contract. It is largely targeted at poor customers and neighborhoods because of the higher risks associated with serving the urban poor.

In TPSB, the bulk seller, known as the barangay association or peoples' organization (PO)—often a long-term and deeply embedded member of the community—is financially responsible for laying small-scale distribution infrastructure within a community and must then set tariffs to recover costs and monitor leakages. POs and the tariffs they set, however, are not regulated by the regulatory authority.

When Manila Water's individual (i.e., non-TPSB) customers have a complaint such as a billing discrepancy or leaky pipes, they can call 1627, a call center, which then transfers the complaint to field officers and designated territory business managers who must inform the complainant how long it will take to redress the problem.

<sup>4</sup> A sample of PGR reports were accessed in March 2008, available at [www.hubli-dharwadcity.gov.in/grievance-redressal.html](http://www.hubli-dharwadcity.gov.in/grievance-redressal.html), [www.karwarcity.gov.in/grievance-redressal.html](http://www.karwarcity.gov.in/grievance-redressal.html), [www.bijapurcity.gov.in/grievance-redressal.html](http://www.bijapurcity.gov.in/grievance-redressal.html). Further analysis needs to be carried out to determine how representative the complaint data is of the actual distribution of grievances in the city population. For instance, anecdotally, inconsistent municipal water supply is a serious grievance in several Karnataka municipalities, especially for the poor who do not have their own borewells, but such grievances are not reflected as priorities in the summary reports generated by the module. person, by telephone, or in writing than through the Internet.

<sup>5</sup> Information provided in this section collected from interviews with Jeric Seville at Manila Water, November 2007.

Once a complaint has been registered, the call center is supposed to provide feedback on the status of the complaint in 24 hours and indicate a time frame within which the complaint will be redressed. Standards for resolving complaints are set by the utility: priority complaints such as no water, dirty water, and leaks must be resolved within 48 hours, while all other complaints must be resolved within 5 days. The system also has built-in automatic escalation, a strategy used to build vertical accountability. If, after the stipulated time frame (48 hours or 5 days depending on the complaint), the complaint has not been resolved, it is transferred to a higher level of management. The complaint keeps escalating every hour until it is resolved. According to Manila Water, this has been one of the key factors in ensuring the timely redressal of complaints.

Although this system is available to individual customers, about 50% of Manila Water's customers—mostly the poor who receive water through TPSB—do not have access to this complaint management system because they are not technically considered Manila Water's customers, even though TPSB customers may face problems such as substandard pipes, leaks, and billing discrepancies. The reason for this, as in the Karnataka case, has to do with the particular institutional structure of water delivery in Manila. The flaw in this case is that unlike the utility's primary customers who have recourse to the complaints system and the regulator, the POs's customers are not considered Manila Water's customers and therefore lack the same privileges. The reason for this flaw is that Manila Water is not obligated under its contract to attend to the complaints of TPSB customers. Therefore, TPSB customers must turn to their PO for redressal of complaints. By some accounts, POs have found to be extremely savvy and responsive to customers (Chng 2007), while by others, POs are characterized as irresponsible and rent seeking (Tinga 2006). As Ferrer (2006) notes, because POs are not subject to regulation, there is always a risk that individual interests of POs may prevail over the interests of the community. The underlying issue is that TPSB customers do not enjoy the same recourse to formal grievance redress mechanisms as Manila Water's customers, even though they are counted in the utility's overall coverage target. This case study shows how vital it is to ensure that grievance redressal systems are accessible to both the poor and the well off, and that it is necessary to address the weaknesses of the institutional structure and preexisting accountability relationships to do this.

## Considerations for Structuring Effective Complaint Management Systems

While institutionalized grievance redressal mechanisms have potential and are attractive to advocates of reforms because they create an image of private sector-like professionalism, critical aspects related to institutional design, relationships of accountability, and regulatory oversight may hinder the efficacy of these systems—both in the ability of providers to be responsive and in accessibility to the poor. In municipal agencies that contract out particular services to private contractors and where contractual relationships are weak (as the case in Greater Bangalore), the formal complaint mechanism was not that effective. What is effective is the informal routes and networks, including local leaders and elected representatives, who can better monitor contractors and ensure proper delivery of services. In private utilities such as Manila Water, it is imperative that grievance redressal mechanisms are available to all types of customers, including the poor. The following are some important considerations when structuring such mechanisms:

- **Multiple routes for grievance redress exist.** Formal, institutionalized grievance redress mechanisms are not likely to replace existing modes of channeling complaints such as civic organizations, elected representatives, or even the media. Data from computerized systems should therefore not be seen as conclusive. Moreover, civic agencies should not address complaints channeled through formal routes to the exclusion of other routes. Each channel—especially more informal ones—is likely to be effective for certain groups of people. It is therefore imperative to acknowledge these alternative routes and strengthen them.
- **Strengthening accountability relationships.** As seen in the Karnataka case, the accountability of private contractors responsible for infrastructure upkeep is fairly low, suggesting that, for grievance redress to work at all, it is crucial that such accountability relationships are strengthened through enforceable contracts or other means. Another way that vertical accountability can be strengthened is through automatic escalation of complaints to the next level in the administrative hierarchy. It is imperative for development banks and practitioners take account of these institutional and stakeholder relationships and understand them before a project is implemented or at least during the early stages.

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- **Institutional and regulatory set up determines accessibility.** As the Manila Water case shows, it is relatively easy for utilities to neglect certain categories of consumers and their grievances because of the regulatory and institutional set up of the concessionaire and stipulations of the contract. TPSB customers didn't have access to Manila Water's customer complaint management system because POs are not regulated in this arrangement. If grievance redress systems are to be accessible to a broad cross section of citizens, such institutional factors must be accounted for.
- **Involvement of elected representatives.** Without support from locally elected representatives to whom a significant proportion of grievances are directed, the sustainability and efficacy of these complaint management systems may be challenged. Complaints routed informally through elected representatives are an important means through which the poor make claims and negotiate services.
- **Sharing of data with NGOs and community groups to enable follow-up.** To make service

providers more responsive, it is necessary to put the grievance data in the public domain, and to mandate that the data is made available to elected representatives, civic organizations, the media, and other watchdog entities.

In conclusion, it is important not to sanction one type of grievance mechanism for all contexts. Not all grievance redressal systems will be the same across projects and cities. A grounded, field-based analysis will reveal how to structure grievance mechanisms depending on the prevailing regulatory and institutional set up and relationships of accountability. In many cases, elected representatives and neighborhood associations are more effective at exerting pressure on municipal agencies and local contractors than institutionalized e-governance tools or telephone hotlines. Where institutionalized mechanisms exist, there is always a risk that they may exclude or not be available to particular groups. Accountability imperatives in reform agendas should thus be pursued, taking into consideration the multiple ways in which citizens interact with the government and service providers.

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