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DECENTRALIZED SERVICE DELIVERY IN PANCHAYATS EXPERIENCE FROM TAMIL NADU

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Abstract:

The future of public service delivery, particularly to the poor, has been an issue of contention in the developing countries, at the level of national and sub-national governments, international financial institutions, development organizations and social movements. The contention is so intense that, in recent years, we have seen major shifts in global policy paradigm for public service delivery, from state provision of the services, to market oriented reforms in 1990s, to introduction of 'democratized governance' in service delivery system during the current decade. In all these paradigms however, the quest has been towards improving efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery. The current paradigm of democratic governance in service delivery emphasizes on 'decentralization' and 'participation' of service users. To many citizens their local government is the most tangible form of government, it is also the layer of government with which they have most contact in their everyday life. This applies to the individual who has chosen a residence, but also applies to the entrepreneur who seeks a place of business. The power of local administration is that it represents ordinary citizens. People eat, drink, work, sleep and have neighbours in a village or a city. The garden, the balcony, the natural green environment round the house or apartment all tend to come under the direct influence of

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what local government is doing. The layout of the residential environment, the feelings that people have when they are home of contentment and safety are partly determined by ideas and decisions that emanate from municipal councils. In assessing the citizen's opinion of government, this proximity and the fact that it concerns very basic matters for citizens is critically important. Against this backdrop, attempt is made in this article to reiterate the importance of institutions of local governance and their functionaries in service delivery with particular reference to Drinking Water in Aalarmarathupatty Village Panchayat, Aathoor Block in Dindigul District Tamil Nadu.

Introduction

The ultimate test of effective governance is the fulfillment of its commitments to the citizens, ensuring delivery of public services right up to the excluded and marginalized sections of the society. Service delivery is an essential function in the relation between government bodies and citizens. Over the past ten years the realization that citizens are customers has become increasingly important to the way governments think and act. Customers have a right to demand services from their suppliers that meet their needs: fast, accessible, of good quality and at modest cost, and all wrapped in friendly treatment. This applies particularly to the government as a supplier of key public services. Good quality and affordable service delivery is also a condition for the good image of government.

The future of public service delivery, particularly to the poor, has been an issue of contention in the developing countries, at the level of national and sub-national governments, international financial institutions, development organizations and social movements. The contention is so intense that, in recent years, we have seen major shifts in global policy paradigm for public service delivery, from state provision of the services, to market oriented reforms in 1990s, to introduction of 'democratized governance' in service delivery system during the current decade. In all these paradigms however, the quest has been towards improving efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery. The current paradigm of democratic governance in service delivery emphasizes on 'decentralization' and 'participation' of service users.

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individual who has chosen a residence, but also applies to the entrepreneur who seeks a place of business. The power of local administration is that it represents ordinary citizens. People eat, drink, work, sleep and have neighbours in a village or a city. The garden, the balcony, the natural green environment round the house or apartment all tend to come under the direct influence of what local government is doing. The layout of the residential environment, the feelings that people have when they are home of contentment and safety are partly determined by ideas and decisions that emanate from municipal councils. In assessing the citizen's opinion of government, this proximity and the fact that it concerns very basic matters for citizens is critically important.

Against this backdrop, attempt is made in this article to reiterate the importance of institutions of local governance and their functionaries (both represent the connecting link between the state and the citizens in terms of the programmes of development) in service delivery with particular reference to Drinking Water in Aalarmarathupatty Village Panchayat, Aathoor Block in Dindigul District Tamil Nadu.

Drinking water

One of the most important public services provided by Gram Panchayat is provision of drinking water. In rural areas, water has always been considered to be available as a common property resource due to its common availability and accessibility in the form of tanks, rivers/streams/canals, ponds/lakes, etc. With escalating population, higher agricultural productivity requiring more irrigation, vagaries of the monsoon and depletion of ground water resources, there is a proportionate increase in demand for adequate supply of safe potable drinking water. The provision of safe potable water therefore then becomes a key responsibility of the Gram Panchayat. The following chapter assesses feedback received from citizens on the various aspects of drinking water as used by them from different sources.

Usage

Studies have indicated that in rural areas the community has access to different sources of drinking water. This includes natural sources as well as those that the state provides. In the case of Aalamarathupatty Village, less than one-fourth households use individual tap connections or piped supply as is shown in Table 1.1. Among the public sources used, mini water supply facilities (26%) are used the most, followed by public taps (25%). About 14% respondents also use other sources, which mainly include irrigated pump sets, wells or natural sources. Similar analysis among Scheduled Caste(Dalit) and Caste Hindu(Upper Caste) areas indicates that there is much variation from the overall findings – usage of piped water in the SC areas is 8% while in the Upper Caste areas this is 25%. Usage patterns of public sources also indicate that there is much variation in the use of public taps between SC areas (7%) and Upper Caste areas (23%); hand pumps are used more in the Caste Hindu areas (23% as against 4% in SC areas), while mini water supply facilities are usedmore in the Upper Caste areas (30% as against 12% in the SC areas).

Table 1.1: Usage of Drinking Water Sources

Sources of drinking water	**% Households UsingN=600**
Piped water (tap at home)	16.7
Public Sources	69.0
Public tap	24.7
Hand pump	18.5
Mini water supply	25.8

Quality of Services

Assessment of the quality of services includes aspects such as frequency, duration, pressure, timing, clarity and taste as well as payments made if any; as applicable to each source of drinking water.

Frequency

Water supply is received weekly most from mini water supply facilities (87%) and least from piped water (39%). More than one-fifth respondents having piped water receive water only once in a week and less often than that. Analysis among Scheduled Caste and Caste Hindu

Community areas also indicates that water is received weekly more from mini water supply than the others, with almost no variation from the overall findings for the source. In the case of public taps also, the variations are marginal from the overall findings – more than 60% users in dry areas get daily supply of water, while this is so for 56% users in wet areas. Among the piped water users, the variation between wet and dry areas is slightly wider - while 46% users in dry areas receive water daily, only 33% have reported receiving water daily in wet areas. Another 33% piped water users in dry areas receive water three times a week, while 29% get water only once a week in wet areas.

Is the frequency sufficient?

When asked whether this frequency is sufficient for their needs, almost three-fourth of the mini water supply users answered in the affirmative, while only 59% among the piped water users, 57% among public tap users and 49% among hand pump users said so. Similar patterns emerge when comparison is made across SCand Caste Hindu areas. Larger proportions of piped water users in the Upper Caste areas (63%) find the water sufficient as against those in SC areas (26%). At the same time, a smaller proportion of hand pump users in SC areas find the water sufficient (23% as against 40% in Upper Caste areas with. Sufficiency levels are higher in general for mini water supply, though this is more so among users in Caste Hindu areas (83% as against 32% in SC areas.

What is the duration of water supply?

Duration of water supply is least from taps at home and the most from mini water supply. It is also interesting to note that users across all sources in the Caste Hindu areas have reported longer duration of water supply than those in the SC areas. Among the wards, users in ward No. 3 have reported maximum duration of water supply from different sources.

How is the pressure from the taps?

Closely linked to duration of water supply is the pressure of water especially among regulated water sources such as piped water and public taps; high pressure indicating more amount of water within a certain duration thus implying faster filling up of vessels. Less than one-fifth piped water users report that there is high pressure of water; this has been observed across the

Caste Hindu and SC dominated areas also. Among public tap users, there is no variation from patterns observedamong piped water users across all users.

Timing

When drinking water is supplied at regular timings, it makes it easy for the users to prepare their storage plans accordingly. However, the study indicates that among the three sources – piped water, public tap and mini water supply (not applicable for hand pumps), majority of users (more than 70%) find no fixed timings in the water supply. This pattern has also been observed among users across Upper Casteand SC areas as well in the village. However, it is interesting to note that in spite of no fixed timings, a majority of the users (more than 60%) do not find this inconvenient across all the three sources of drinking water supply at all levels.

Characteristics

Whether the water received is safe to consume can be perceived by assessing some characteristics such as clarity and taste.

How is the clarity of the water?

The study indicates that among overall users, more than 90% piped water users get clear water. Users of the public sources including public tap, hand pump and mini water supply have echoed the same. An overwhelming 98% piped water users in both the Upper Casteand SC areas found the water clear.

What is the taste of the water?

Patterns related to taste of water indicate that majority of the respondents (more than 80% in most cases) find the water sweet and this cuts across all the different sources covered in the study. Analysis upper Caste wet and SC areas as well as across the village also echoes the same pattern, with more than 80% on an average stating that the water received is sweet.

Getting a Piped Water Connection

Piped water users were also asked questions with regard to the type of services received while getting their piped water connections. It has been observed that more than half of the households surveyed (52%) received a connection after the year 2000, while another 38% received in the 1990s. The same pattern is replicated among the SC and Caste Hinduareas; only in SC Wards, more than 61% users have received their connection after 2000. None of the users found any problems getting the piped water connection, though the average water deposit payment varied from about Rs. 370/- to Rs. 596/-. The overall average amount is Rs. 475/- approximately. More than 80% of the piped water users reported paying water rates regularly; the pattern is same at the overall level as well as across SC and upper Caste areas.

Services from Public Drinking Water Sources

Among the main public sources covered, including public taps, hand pumps and mini water supply, some common aspects were covered in the survey, which included accessibility, provision of platforms, fetching water, queues and incidence of breakdowns.

How accessible are the public sources?

More than 12 % public tap users have access to a public tap within a distance of 100 metres, across all levels of users. Among mini water supply users also, more than 60% users have access to the same within 100 metres. In the case of hand pumps, slightly more than one-third of the users have access within 100 metres in the dry areas.

Who fetches water in the household?

The study indicates that across all the sources it is predominantly the adult female of the household (more than 70%) who fetches water from the public source, followed by the female child (13 to 15%). The proportion is high in the case of mini water supply facilities where 82% females fetch water, while for hand pump this is 73% and for public taps 80%. Among wet and dry areas, fetching water from public taps is done primarily by the adult females (82% in dry areas and 77% in wet areas) though there are more female children involved in fetching water in wet areas (16% as against 8% in dry areas). For mini water supply, more than 80% adult females and around 10% female children fetch water. Interestingly, in the case of hand pumps around

17% adult men also fetch water in the wet areas (as against 10% persons fetching water from the public sources have to wait in a queue.

Among the three public sources, users of public taps have to stand in queue the most, especially in the SC areas (97%). On the other hand, not many of the mini water supply users have to stand in queue to get water, especially in the Caste Hindu areas.

Are the public sources well maintained?

All public sources usually do have a platform around them with the intention that water spilt does not spread out into the surrounding areas and is properly drained out, which is also important from the hygiene point of view. Public taps have the least proportion of platforms, while mini water supply has the most, especially in the SC areas. When asked whether these platforms were clean, more than one-third of the public tap users (35%) found the platforms unclean. However less than one-fourth of the hand pump users found it so, while at the same time more than 90% mini water supply users report that the platforms are clean. More than 40% public tap users in the dry areas found the platforms unclean. More than 80% hand pump users in Upper Caste areas found the platforms clean which is so among more than 90% mini water supply users in the SC areas. Among mini water supply users, specific questions were asked regarding taps around the cistern. In terms of number of taps, more than 85% of the users have mentioned the existence of about 3-4 taps around the cistern. Between the Caste Hindu and SC areas 15% users in the Caste Hindu areas have also mentioned only two taps around the cistern. When asked whether all the taps worked properly, more than 60% users answered in the affirmative, though variations exist among wards where almost 60% users in Ward-2 and Ward-3 have reported only some of the taps working properly. With regard to the cistern where the water is pumped into, more than 70% users observed that it is covered; among the wards, all users in Aalamarathupatty Village have said so with regard to the same.

How often do breakdowns occur?

Feedback on frequency of breakdowns from public tap users indicates that almost half the users (48%) experience a breakdown once in three months. Another 17% reported breakdowns occurring once in 6 months to one year. However, 22% users have also mentioned that they have

not experienced any breakdowns in the public taps they use. In the case of hand pumps, which are managed by the Gram Panchayat as reported by all its users, almost one-third users experience breakdowns once in three months, another one-fifth once in six months and 20% users have also mentioned that their experience with breakdowns is less frequent than even once a year. Among mini water supply users, breakdowns are experienced

once in three months by more than onefourth users and by another 26% once in six months. However, almost one-fourth users have also reported having no experience of breakdowns. In the Caste Hindu and SC areas, frequent breakdowns are seen more in SC areas (by 56% within three months as against 43% in Caste Hindu areas), especially in Ward No-3 (65%) among public tap users. A somewhat similar pattern is also seen among hand pump users, with more than one-third users experiencing a breakdown once in three months in Caste Hindu areas as against 26% users in the SC areas; more than one-fifth hand pump users in SC users reported having no experience of breakdowns as against 14% in Caste Hindu areas. Among mini water supply users, no breakdowns have been reported by almost 30% users as against only 15% in SC areas. Incidence of breakdowns is again more in dry areas (33% reporting once in six months as against 20% in Caste Hindu areas). Hand pumps had the greatest number of days of downtime while mini water supply facilities had the least downtime. At the same time, incidence of last breakdown also indicates that on an average the last breakdown has occurred more than three months back among hand pumps.

Problem Incidence and Problem Resolution

The frequency of occurrence of problems with drinking water sources, the intensity of the problem and time taken to resolve the problem reflects the responsiveness and efficiency of the service provider. While the earlier section examined at the specific issue of breakdown of the public sources, this section discusses the type of problems that the users in general have to face and also, the efforts they make to resolve them.

Problem Incidence and Resolution

Among the four major drinking water sources used among the respondents, proportion of complaints by hand pump users is the most (64%), followed by public tap and mini water supply

users as shown in Chart 1.7. As the Chart also indicates, users in the dry areas across all sources encounter more problems than those in the wet areas, especially hand pump users (76%). While Chart 1.7 depicts problem occurrences as experienced by the users, Chart 1.8 shows the proportion of users who got their problems resolved from among those who reported problem incidence. If the two charts are looked at together, it can be observed that though the proportion of problems for piped water users is low, the problem resolution for the same is even lower. At the same time, problem resolution is higher among public tap users especially in the wet areas than hand pump users, especially in the case of Kunigal, where more than 90% users got their problem resolved from among those who had reported problem incidence. In the dry areas, hand pump users have high problem incidence as well as high rate of problem resolution. Among mini water supply users, though problem incidence is lesser in wet areas, problem resolutions take place in equal proportions.

Nature of Problems

Analysis of the nature of problems as reported by different users indicates that while insufficiency of water is the main problem among piped water (74%) and public tap users (46%), high breakdown frequency (40% among hand pump users) and long downtime (44% among mini water supply users) are the other problems encountered by the users. A comparative analysis of the problems across wet and dry areas indicates that more users in the dry areas experience problems such as longer downtime (48% and 51% as against 25% and 36% in wet areas among public tap and mini water supply users respectively) and breakdown of hand pumps (49% as against 16% in wet areas). At the same time, marginally higher proportions of users across all sources in the wet areas have interestingly reported insufficiency of water as a major problem, especially in Koratagere (90% piped water users and 63% public tap users).

Interaction: Routine Work and Specific Problems

Experiences with regard to interaction between users and service providers reflect the efficiency and responsiveness of the service provider. When asked where they go in case of any problems related to water supply, 14% mentioned having had no problems. Among those who had problems, almost 40% have not lodged a complaint anywhere, 37% have gone to the Adhyaksha/

Upadhyaksha/Member and another 22% have gone to the Gram Panchayat office. Between the wet and dry areas, non-lodging of complaints is more in wet areas (41%)

while going to the Adhyaksha/Upadhyaksha/ Member is seen more in the dry areas (41%). Among those visiting the Gram Panchayat (GP) office or the Adhyaksha/Upadhyaksha/ Member, when asked whether they have visited the GP in the last one year in connection with water supply, only 26% users replied in the affirmative – 31% in wet areas (40% in Koratagere) and 21% in dry areas (28% in Chiknayakanahalli). Specifying reasons for their visit to the GP, an overwhelming 98% mentioned that they had gone to complain about a specific problem, only 2% (about 10 users) reported going to the GP for routine work such as payment of water bills and for getting water connections.

Interaction for Routine Work

Among those users who visited the GP office for routine work, everyone knew whom to contact to get their work done and 80% also knew the process to be followed to solve the problem. Assessment of satisfaction on different aspects of interaction during routine work show generally high satisfaction levels with regard to most of the factors – time taken to attend (70%), time taken to finish (60%), behaviour of staff (70%), availability of staff (70%), helpfulness of staff (50%), efficiency with which the problem was dealt with (50%) and ability of the staff in providing the information that the user required (50%).

Interaction for Specific Problem

When visiting the GP office for specific problems, almost all the users knew whom to contact, though 84% knew the process to be followed to solve the problem; this awareness existed more among the users in the dry areas - 95% (all in Chiknayakanahalli) as against 76% (70% in Koratagere) in the wet areas. Chart 1.9 indicates reporting of satisfaction levels by users with various aspects of interaction with the service provider while visiting their office. As the chart indicates, aspects relating directly to problem solving aspects such as time taken to finish and efficiency in dealing with the problem are less satisfactory to the users than others such as time taken to attend and behaviour and availability of staff. Users in the dry areas have generally

indicated marginally higher complete satisfaction level than their counterparts in the wet areas. However, this margin is quite wide with regard to time taken to
finish where only 28% users in wet areas are completely satisfied as compared to 43% users in the dry areas.

Corruption

When asked whether they had to pay anything extra / bribe to get their work done from the Gram Panchayat in the last one year in connection with water supply, very few users who had gone to the GP office or the Adhyaksha/Upadhyaksha/Member said that they had done so (6, all in the wet areas). Out of these only three used an agent / middleman, mainly to clean the tank (mini water supply). The money was mainly demanded (averaging to about Rs. 58/-), though all the six users got their work done.

Overall Satisfaction

All users were asked to express their satisfaction/ dissatisfaction with the quality of water supply service provided by the Gram Panchayat taking everything into consideration. Among those who have responded, more than one-third users have expressed dissatisfaction. As Chart 1.10 clearly indicates, more proportion of users in the wet areas are completely satisfied with the overall quality of water supply services – this has been expressed by 54% users in Kunigal. In the dry areas, there are more partly satisfied users and also more dissatisfied users (43% in Chiknayakanahalli) as compared to the wet areas. Among those who have expressed their dissatisfaction, reasons mainly include insufficient water supply (66%), lack of proper maintenance (26%) and long distance to the public sources (10%). Proportion of users citing their reasons are more or less proportionately distributed between the talukas in the wet and the dry areas.

Suggestions for Improvement

All users were asked to give their suggestions for improving the quality of water service provided by the Gram Panchayat. Of the 58% users who responded to this question, Table 1.4 indicates the pattern of suggestions that have been expressed by the respondents. The table shows that people have voiced the need for more public sources of water supply, mainly hand

pumps in the dry areas and public taps in the wet areas. Another suggestion is for water to be supplied on a daily basis, which has been mentioned by more than one-third users in Chiknayakanahalli but only by 10% users in Pavagada.

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