Public Grievance and Redressal Module – Helpline in Karnataka

Anjali K Mohan
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Conceptualised and overseen by the National e-Governance Division (NeGD) of Media lab Asia/DeitY these case studies are submitted by e-Governance Practitioners from Government and Industry/Research Institutions. The cases submitted by the authors are vetted by experts from outside and within the Government for learning and reference value, relevance to future project implementers, planners and to those involved in e-governance capacity Building programs before they are recommended for publication. National Institute for Smart Government (NISG), working on behalf of this NeGD provided program management support and interacted with the authors and subject matter experts in bringing out these published case studies. It is hoped that these case studies drawn from successful and failed e-Governance projects would help practitioners to understand the real-time issues involved, typical dilemmas faced by e-Governance project implementers, and possible solutions to resolve them.

Acknowledgment

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ABSTRACT

This case study documents a Public Grievance and Redressal Module (PGRM), also referred to as “Helpline”, which is currently operational in 213 urban local bodies (ULBs) in the southern state of Karnataka, India. The Helpline is one of the five reforms that are currently being implemented as part of the Municipal Reforms Programme (MRP) of the Government of Karnataka (GoK). It has been functional in 213 small and medium towns of Karnataka since 2009. While the MRP is conceived and implemented with the objective of furthering decentralisation through improved governance at the ULB level, Helpline in particular aims to strengthen service delivery mechanisms at the ULB level through enhanced community participation in governance.1 Through Helpline, citizens can register their grievances and as well as track the progress of redressal (over the net or through a phone call) using a complaint number generated by the helpline at the time of registration of grievance. The reform in generating this complaint number aims to build in state-citizen accountability measures as a means to ensuring effective service delivery.

Key words

Helpline, public grievances, service delivery, Urban Local Bodies, eGovernance, Karnataka

List of Abbreviations

PGRM - Public Grievance and Redressal Module
ULBs - Urban Local Bodies
MRP - Municipal Reforms Programme
GoK - Government of Karnataka
NGO - Non-Governmental Organisation
CAA - Constitutional Amendment Act
ICTs - Information and Communication Technologies
DMA - Directorate of Municipal Administration

Note to Practitioners

For practitioners, what is important to comprehend from this intervention is that while theoretically the process of complaint registration and tracking might enhance accountability and improve service delivery, it is not as simple. Helpline is a political reform – efficient service delivery is the basis for re-election. Elected representatives are therefore a crucial stakeholder while being an important link between the state and the citizen. Yet, the Helpline does not factor

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1 The five reforms aim to strengthen ULBs to perform their functions as decentralised units of governance. These include provision of basic services like water supply, solid waste management, street lights, provision and maintenance of roads, and administration. The reforms also aim to strengthen the ULBs financially by enabling them to raise their own revenues to perform these functions.
them in the loop (elaborated in the case). Factoring in this stakeholder within the online tool is an imperative and an important learning. It will not only serve to close the loop of service provision but will also add to accountability mechanisms.

Furthermore, what is important in this case is that the Helpline in all ULBs is manned by a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) brought in by the GoK to add credibility to the system. While the move may have merit, what is important to understand is the rights and powers that are conferred onto the NGO in the reform process. While the NGO may ensure credibility in the system, its presence without any enforceability rights can in effect jeopardize the envisaged state-citizen accountability. Understanding the socio-political contexts within which the reform is being introduced is therefore an imperative.

**Note to Instructors**

While using the Helpline as pedagogy material instructors / practitioners may encourage the participants to

1. Understand the context within which any public grievance mechanism is being introduced. Special attention should be given to the political context.

2. Comprehend and acknowledge the existing mechanisms of grievance redressal and the main stakeholders (especially the political representatives) involved in the process

3. Integrate the existing mechanisms within the digitized tool to avoid parallel flows of information

4. Give adequate thought to how to operationalize objectives of enhanced participation as a means to increased accountability - an imperative to the success of any grievance redressal mechanism.

5. If the grievance redressal mechanism relies on a non-state actor for delivery, adequate thought to be given to the operationalization of the public private participation modes and mechanisms.

**1. PROJECT CONTEXT**

The Government of India’s 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA), 1992, mandates that ULBs be strengthened as units of local self-governance. Given the rapid proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), agencies like the World Bank and the United Nations have been increasingly advocating technology as a means to deliver on various functions of the State, service delivery at the local level being one of them. In other words, technology is being advocated as a means to strengthen governments at various levels – the local included. It is cited as a means to decentralisation. This case study documents a public grievance and redressal module (PGRM), also known as Helpline, an e-governance intervention currently being implemented by the Government of Karnataka’s (GoK), Directorate of Municipal Administration (DMA) in 213 ULBs in the state. In 2005, Helpline was operational in 49 cities of Karnataka. By
2009, it was operational in the remaining 164 ULBs. Helpline is a complaint registration and tracking system that uses the internet, phone, e-mail and paper to register complaints. Through Helpline, citizens can register their grievances and as well as track the progress of redressal (over the net or through a phone call) through a “complaint tracking number” generated by the system. In generating this number, Helpline aims to strengthen and build accountability for effective service delivery and governance (CMAK, 2006, 2009).

2. PROJECT OVERVIEW

As a process, when the complaint is filed over phone, through an e-mail or on paper, it is registered by Helpline in the online tool (Figure 1.1 and 1.2). Once registered, the tool generates a complaint number for the citizen to track the status of the complaint (Figure 1.3). Simultaneously, the complaint is posted to the concerned section in the ULB for redressal. To address the complaint, the concerned ULB staff is required to access this post through a user name and password. After the complaint is addressed (or not), the concerned staff member is once again required to log in explaining the redressal of the complaint. The tool prescribes a time limit of 72 hours within which complaints are to be addressed. If a complaint is not addressed within this time, it is escalated to the next level in the hierarchy, thereby allowing for a censure on the concerned staff. The censure usually reflects in the annual performance report of the ULB staff, in turn, impacting promotions and career trajectories. Furthermore, once the status is updated in the tool, the Helpline staff is required to verify with the complainant whether the complaint was redressed satisfactorily. It is only after obtaining the satisfaction of the citizen that the status of the complaint is posted as “closed” on the tool. If not, the Helpline staff is required to post the unsatisfactory redressal complaint status. Thus, the tool, by generating a complaint number and instituting a system of sanctions, aims to ensure, through timely complaint redressal, accountability and efficiency of the ULB. In other words, the efficiency of Helpline hinges on the active participation of citizens.

Additionally, the tool generates a database of the problems faced by the city, their geographical location and the efficacy of the administrative machinery in timely redressal of complaints (Figure 1.4). This database is consolidated into bi-weekly reports and gives the status on the number of complaints registered, complaints addressed and those being processed. This database is accessible to the administrators in the ULB and all the Urban Development Departments at the state level (Figure 1.3, 1.5). It is envisaged that these reports will “aid the Municipal Commissioners and other officials to streamline the municipal functions through process reengineering [and] proper planning [which] in turn bring about transparency of information and smoother delivery of municipal services” (CMAK 2006: 3, Ranganathan, 2010, 77). Thus, Helpline

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2 The prescribed time limits vary across Corporations and Municipalities as well as across complaints. However, interviews both with the Reforms Cell, and in Hassan and Bidar, confirmed the 72 hour deadline for most complaints.
3 The Helpline staff is different from the ULB staff. While the former is hired by the NGO managing the PGR cell and is on the roles of the NGO, the latter are on the roles of the ULB.
tracks the status of complaints till they are addressed, besides providing an insight into the nature and geographic/locational distribution of complaints.

Figure 1.1: Complaint registration and redressal module in the PGR cell

- 24x7/12x7 PGR Helpline managed by NGOs, PGR Cell
- Registration of complaints (Telephone/Email/Paper)
- Department wise segregation of complaints
- Escalation to concerned Department/Section
- Complaint routed to concerned field Officer
- Redressal of complaint
- Status of the complaint updated in the online tool
- Cross verified by the helpline through phone.
- Complaint checked and closed

If not addressed within the stipulated time or satisfactorily, complaint escalated to the next level in the hierarchy

Source: Compiled by the author
Figure 1.2: Online Complaint Registration

Source: Hassan ULB website

Figure 1.3: Complaint Tracking Number and Mechanism

Source: Hassan ULB website
3. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACED DURING IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 Implementation Strategy

As an implementation strategy, the Helpline relies on NGOs (to receive and escalate complaints) to deliver on its objectives. The NGO is appointed through a tender and is appointed on the basis of a “demonstrated strong presence in the city.....to manage the front end in order to make the PGRM [Helpline] more accessible and user friendly to citizens. These NGOs typically have linkages with local communities and with governments that make
them trusted partners for both citizens and governments” (Wallack and Nadhamuni, 2009). The idea of an NGO stemmed from the need to add credibility to the system. The GoK believes that the presence of an NGO is meant to generate confidence in citizens that their complaints are being heard by a third party and will therefore be addressed. Thus, the NGO constitutes an important intermediary between the state and its citizens. It is integrated with the ULB by physically locating it within the ULB premises. Thus, most state-citizen interactions happen within the premises of the ULB. Interviews with citizens revealed that many viewed the NGO as the state that receives records and ensures complaint redressal. While NGOs are “legitimized by their role in creating empowered citizens who will demand state accountability and good governance, build a strong and vibrant civil society, and deepen democracy” (Kudva, 2006, 227), in Helpline in Karnataka, these NGOs are also instrumental in assisting the state improve service delivery.

An evaluation of Helpline conducted by CMAK in six ULBs in 2006, and subsequently in eleven more ULBs in 2009 showed that the Helpline is not working as anticipated (CMAK, 2006, 2009). These evaluations report that “majority of the un-registered complaints are getting cleared on spot through Field staffs when they go for field work”. Interviews in Hassan and Bidar supported these findings. It was revealed that the citizens find it easier to route their complaints via elected representatives, i.e. the earlier system is what continues to work (Figure 1.6). The DMA too believes that not only does Helpline capture complaints partially, but the nature of complaints it captures does not reflect ground reality.

**Figure 1.6: Helpline: Anticipated and Actual Citizen Complaint Redressal Mechanism**

![Helpline diagram](source: Compiled by author)
In other words, interviews with DMA, ULB staff and political representatives as well as citizens revealed that complaints routed and redressed through Helpline are limited. Thus the councilor continues to be an important interface between the state and the citizen. They represent “their constituency in the municipal council, in day-to-day city life” (Teefflen and Baud, 2011, 180), by positioning themselves as ground-level problem solvers. For the councilors, being involved in resolving service delivery issues is critical. Interviews showed that Councilors in Hassan and Bidar have expressed their willingness to be a part of reforms:

“We represent our ward and our constituencies. As people’s representatives, it is our duty and our right to know what is happening in our ward. We are not against Helpline. However, we should know what the problems of our ward are, and our people [read constituents] should know that we are instrumental in redressing these problems” (Councilor, Bidar, 21-04-2012).

“The urban local body is like a cart with two wheels. While the administration as managed by the bureaucrats constitutes one wheel, the elected representatives, chosen by the people are the other wheel. The cart can only move forward if both the wheels roll together in the same direction. It will not move on one wheel, or if the two wheels are moving in different directions” (Councilor, Hassan, 08-03-2012).

Since the councilors are not part of the reforms process, many have established independent helplines for their respective wards, or what Wallack and Nadhamuni (2009, 12) refer to as “parallel flows of information”.

3.2 MAIN CHALLENGES

While Helpline was conceived as a means to ease the process of registering and tracking complaints pertaining to service provision, the first challenge that the state faced was to convince citizens in various towns and cities that their complaints are being heard by a third party (i.e. the NGO) and therefore will be addressed. In other words, the challenge was to bring credibility in the system to institute confidence amongst citizens. It was with this perspective that the NGO was involved. It was believed that the citizen in seeing the NGO as a third party will get the assurance that their complaints will get addressed. However, what perhaps merits mention here is that while the state views the NGO as a third party that will ensure credibility; the citizen views the NGO as the state that receives records and redresses complaints and this has implications on the efficiency and effectiveness of this e-governance reform as highlighted in the key lessons learnt from this intervention.

The second challenge was to ensure efficient and satisfactory redressal of complaints that are registered with Helpline. Service provision involves all departments of the ULBs, that is,
engineering, water supply and sanitation, health, revenue, finance and administration. Getting all these departments to respond to the woes of the citizen in a timely manner was a challenge, primarily because there were no enforceability and answerability (as measures of accountability) checks and balances in the system. Consequently, the citizen had no way to trace the status of the complaint. The concerned ULB staff was not answerable to the citizen. It was for this reason that most citizens filed their complaints with the councilor. Being an elected representative, he/she is accountable to the citizens.

In ensuring a satisfactory redressal of service delivery complaints, the councilor stands to maximized his / her chances of re-election. However, in this process (where the councilor is used as a channel to address complaints) the ULBs stand to lose. There is no system of records on the nature and location of complaints. In introducing the online tool which not just generates a complaint tracking number, but also generates data on the nature and location of the complaint, the state aimed to ensure accountability of the ULB to the citizen as well as a system of records that would assist the decision makers to understand the nature and pattern of service delivery complaints.

Third, training and building capacities of the ULB staff (across all departments) to engage with technology was, and remains a challenge. It was noted that most staff do not use the online tool. The few complaints that are registered with Helpline tend to be communicated to the concerned staff either on paper or by a phone call. Once addressed, it is communicated to the NGO through the same channel. In other words, the online tool is not being used by those for whom it is designed i.e. the ULB staff. It is only the Helpline staff that is using the online tool. With the tools not being used by those for whom these are designed (in this case the ULB staff from various departments) the level of engagement with and ownership of these reforms at the ULB level is dismal. Even after a decade of implementation, the DMA continues to be the main owner with the ULBs showing little or no engagement.

3.3 OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

The Helpline has three main benefits. First, it has allowed a standard system of complaint registration and redressal across the state. The same Helpline tool has been deployed across 213 ULBs across the state and all ULBs use a standard categorization of problems. This categorization, in turn allows the tool to generate bi-weekly reports that reflect the nature of problems, their geographic location and the ability of the ULBs to redress these complaints. These reports not only allow the DMA to monitor and supervise the ULBs (and therefore hold them accountable for effective service provision), but also gives an overview of the service delivery problems that the city is facing. Second, the ULBs are now familiar with potential benefits of technology and how it can enhance efficient service delivery. With the introduction of the Helpline, the GoK has introduced systemic changes in the ULBs. To quote an example, IT skill set has been introduced within the ULBs. Fourth, the Helpline has paved the way for civil society (in this case the NGO) participation in e-governance.
4. KEY LESSONS

First, while the NGO has been brought in by the state as a means to provide credibility in the complaint registration and redressal system, what merits mention is that the NGO can only receive and forward these complaints to the respective ULB departments. In effect, it has not been given any enforceability powers. Yet, for the citizen the NGO is the state that is responsible for complaint redressal. With proof of grievance registration, citizens can supposedly hold the ULB accountable for effective and timely grievance redressal. Yet, the presence of the NGO as an intermediary between the State (ULB) and the citizen, but with no enforceability powers has, in effect, created a vacuum, that has blurred the ULB’s accountability to the citizen.

Second, with the introduction of Helpline, the implicit assumption that the citizen will bypass the councilor seems to be misplaced, as is the expectation that Helpline will replace the councilor as the link between the State (ULB) and the citizen. By not involving the councilors in complaint redressal, a vital link in the State (ULB)-citizen relationship is ignored. Field work revealed that in most ULBs, elected representatives have been running their own helplines at the ward level i.e. there exist parallel flows of information which in turn render the statistics generated by the tool incorrect. Thus, a vital lesson learnt from this e-governance intervention is the importance of understanding the nature of the reform in its wider context. The outcomes of the Helpline in Karnataka stress the importance of understanding the political nature of this reform and, therefore, the need to rope in the elected representatives in the reform process. Introducing technology in any context requires an understanding and acknowledgement of the context for it to be successful. In not including the elected representatives in the reform process, the reform loop is left open.

Third, because the Helpline is not working as anticipated, the databases that are being generated by the online tool are incomplete. These data bases neither reflect the true nature of problems associated with service delivery nor do they reflect an accurate picture of the capacity of the ULB staff to address the problems associated with service delivery. Consequently, the efficacy of bi-weekly reports as policy tools which will allow decisions makers at various levels of the state to plan proactively is undermined.

Finally, the fact that the ULB officials are not engaging with the online tool has impacted the ownership of reforms by the ULBs and the drive to make these reforms successful. Ownership of reforms is critical to ensure that the reforms are implemented effectively. With the ULBs neither using the online tools nor adopting them fully, the reforms are not serving the purpose of strengthening the ULBs or furthering the decentralisation agenda i.e. the objectives of the programme are compromised.

5. METHODOLOGY ADOPTED FOR CASE WRITING
The case study documentation is based on field work carried out initially, in 2010 and subsequently as a more focused activity from February 2012 to May 2012. The finding presented above rely on a combination of semi structured qualitative interviews, participant observation, and secondary data analysis. The interviews covered several stakeholders, both at the state and in Hassan and Bidar. 100 interviews were conducted; 35 in Bangalore, India and remaining 65 in the ULBs of Hassan and Bidar. While 35 interviews in Bangalore focused on understanding the programme objectives, philosophy and implementation strategy, the 65 in Hassan and Bidar were focused on understanding how the Helpline was implemented at the ULB level, the experience of the ULB and the NGO in implementation and the benefits that the citizen derived from it. Interviews were conducted with staff from all sections of the ULB; although the focus was on Helpline. The interviews sought explanations on how the reforms are implemented, the process re-engineering that is involved and the involvement of the state and the non-state actors. Interviews were mainly in Kannada, the primary language of Karnataka, and at times in English. Most interviews were recorded, although at times there were requests for the recorder to be switched off. Shorter conversations with the ULB staff and citizens, and field observations, provided a glimpse into the actual working of the ULB. In both Hassan and Bidar, citizen movement was observed. Interactions with the ULB staff and informal conversations with citizens both within and outside the ULB premises provided an understanding of the perception and experience of the citizen with the reforms. Finally, political representatives in both ULBs were interviewed, to understand their perception of reforms and their utility. This approach allowed a triangulation of information from diverse sources. Care was taken to interview councilors from all the political parties represented within the council.
6. CONTACT DETAILS OF THE CASE AUTHOR, PROJECT OWNER

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7. PROJECT CASE FACT SHEET

- Project name: Public Grievance and Redressal Module (PGRM) also referred to as Helpline
- Funding: Initially by the ADB covering 49 local bodies. The remaining 164 ULBs were funded by the WB.
- Completion Date: March 31st 2014
- Lending Instrument: Specific Investment Loan
- Implementing Agencies: Directorate of Municipal Administration (DMA) and the Karnataka Urban Infrastructure Development Finance Corporation through Urban Local Bodies.
- Project initiation year – 2002- 2003
- Number of ULBs with computerized basic municipal functions, except PTIS - 213
- Number of ULBs where the online tool has been deployed: 213
- The project got an extension for two years on March, 2012
- Project completion year – 2013- 14
8. References


