Citizen Charter

What are Citizen Charters (CC)?

- First introduced in early 1990’s, they represented a landmark shift in the delivery of public services.
- Emphasised on citizens as customers by ensuring that public services are responsive to the citizens they serve.
- Basically a set of commitments made by an organization regarding the standards of service which it delivers.
- It comprises of the Vision and Mission Statement of the organization, stating the outcomes desired and the broad strategy to achieve these goals and outcomes.
- Clearly states what subjects it deals with and the service areas it broadly covers.
- The Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011 (Citizens Charter) seeks to create a mechanism to ensure timely delivery of goods and services to citizens. It requires every public authority to publish a CC within six months of the commencement of the Act and levies a penalty of up to Rs 50,000 for failure to render services.

Principles of Service Delivery

- Quality - improving the quality of services
- Choice - for the users wherever possible
- Standards - specifying what to expect within a time frame
- Value - for the taxpayers’ money
- Accountability - of the service provider (individual as well as Organization)
- Transparency - in rules, procedures, schemes and grievance redressal
- Participative - Consult and involve

Shortcomings of CC in India

- Devoid of participative mechanisms - in a majority of cases, not formulated through a consultative process with cutting edge staff who will finally implement it.
- Poor design and content: lack of meaningful and succinct CC, absence of critical information that end-users need to hold agencies accountable.
- Lack of public awareness: only a small percentage of end-users are aware of the commitments made in the CC since effective efforts of communicating and educating the public about the standards of delivery promise have not been undertaken.
- Charters are rarely updated: making it a one-time exercise, frozen in time.
- End-users, Civil society organizations and NGOs are not consulted when CCs are drafted: Since a CC’s primary purpose is to make public service delivery more citizen-centric, consultation with stakeholders is a must.
- Measurable standards of delivery are rarely defined: making it difficult to assess whether the desired level of service has been achieved or not.
- Little interest shown by the organizations in adhering to their CC: since there is no citizen friendly mechanism to compensate the citizen if the organization defaults.
- Tendency to have a uniform CC for all offices under the parent organization. CC have still not been adopted by all Ministries/Departments. This overlooks local issues.
Reforming CC to make them Effective

- **One size does not fit all**: formulation of CC should be a decentralized activity with the head office providing only broad guidelines.
- **Wide consultation process**: CC be formulated after extensive consultations within the organization followed by a meaningful dialogue with civil society.
- **Firm commitments to be made**: CC must be precise and make firm commitments of service delivery standards to the citizens/consumers in quantifiable terms wherever possible.
- **Redressal mechanism in case of default**: clearly lay down the relief which the organization is bound to provide if it has defaulted on the promised standards of delivery.
- **Periodic evaluation of CC**: preferably through an external agency.
- **Hold officers accountable for results**: fix specific responsibility in cases where there is a default in adhering to the CC.
- **Include Civil Society in the process**: to assist in improvement in the contents of the Charter, its adherence as well as educating the citizens about the importance of this vital mechanism.

**Way Forward**

- A Citizens’ Charter cannot be an end in itself, it is rather a means to an end - a tool to ensure that the citizen is always at the heart of any service delivery mechanism.
- Drawing from best practice models such as the Sevottam Model (a Service Delivery Excellence Model) can help CC in becoming more citizen centric.