



CALLING CITIZENS, IMPROVING THE STATE:
PAKISTAN'S CITIZEN FEEDBACK MONITORING PROGRAM, 2008 – 2014

SYNOPSIS

In early 2008, Zubair Bhatti, administrative head of the Jhang district in Pakistan's Punjab province, recognized the need to reduce petty corruption in the local civil service—a problem that plagued not only Punjab but also all of Pakistan. He began to contact citizens on their cell phones to learn about the quality of the service they had received. Those spot checks became the basis for a social audit system that spanned all 36 districts in Punjab by 2014. The provincial government outsourced much of the work to a call center, which surveyed citizens about their experiences with 16 different public services. The data from that call center helped district coordination officers identify poorly performing employees and branches, thereby enhancing the capability of the government to improve service delivery. By early 2014, the province was sending about 12,000 text messages daily to check on service quality. More than 400,000 citizens provided information between the beginning of the initiative and 2014. Known as the Citizen Feedback Monitoring Program, the Punjab's social audit system became the template for similar innovations in other provinces and federal agencies in Pakistan.

Mohammad Omar Masud drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in Punjab, Pakistan, in January and March 2014. Case published February 2015.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2008, an irate government official walked into the office of Zubair Bhatti, district coordination officer (DCO)¹ of Jhang district, in Pakistan's Punjab province. The official complained that one of the land registry employees—someone working only a few steps away—had asked him for a bribe. “I have been trying to tell him that I am a government officer, but he is still asking for money to register my property transfer document,” the official explained.

Bhatti, whose job put him in charge of the district administration, conducted a surprise inspection and initiated a formal corruption

investigation into the behavior of the accused district official. But he worried that most of Jhang's 3.3 million residents had no similar opportunity for redress.

District offices handled services such as property registrations and driver's licenses, as well as health, education, and income assistance programs. Bhatti suspected that solicitation of bribes by district officials for delivery of public services was not unusual, yet he lacked the time to effectively spot-check a district administration that comprised almost 20,000 employees.

One option was to let citizens themselves raise the alarm. Jhang district already had a complaint system that enabled the district

coordination officer to initiate investigations. However, the process was slow, and few citizens had the time and motivation to endure the cumbersome process that required personal appearances in front of inquiry officers—especially if the citizens had no idea whether senior officials were involved in the kickbacks and might retaliate against them. The angered official in his doorway had courage, Bhatti said: “He probably knew that I wasn’t getting a cut.”

Bhatti wondered whether there was a way that new technologies could be applied to help monitor the day-to-day conduct of government service workers. He decided to experiment by ordering officials of the property registration office to collect the cell phone numbers of citizens who used the service each day and then send a daily list to his office. Bhatti called random numbers from the list and asked the people who answered about their experiences during their visits to the registry.

The experiment paid off. Bhatti discovered, for example, that many visitors to the property registration office did not understand the fees and taxes they were required to pay. That lack of understanding, coupled with low literacy, made many citizens dependent on the services of deed writers, who approached them in the office and offered to help prepare their documents. The deed writers typically overstated the actual fees the registry required, pocketed the difference, and paid kickbacks to property registration clerks to get priority and special preference in the registration process.

Bhatti introduced a receipt system to limit the practice. The clerks in the registry had to provide each citizen with a receipt indicating the taxes the citizen paid to the registration office, the fee the deed writer charged, and the name of the clerk processing the transaction. Bhatti checked the receipts for anomalies in the reported payments to deed writers and the taxes paid in the

registration office. He followed up by calling citizens to verify the payments made.

Bhatti expanded the initiative to other district offices. He created paper forms for government workers to record the cell phone numbers of citizens visiting the registration branch and other service facilities. He directed mobile service providers such as livestock extension workers, who visited farmers to provide animal husbandry services, to record farmers’ cell phone numbers so he could call farmers.

Bhatti believed that making personal calls to citizens sent a powerful message that he and other high-level officials were honest, trustworthy, and seeking to help. In the beginning, the calls took only about 15 minutes a day, and Bhatti jotted down any negative feedback from citizens for necessary action. He realized he could build credibility for the government by reaching out to citizens rather than waiting for disgruntled citizens to come to him. “I would see the word-of-mouth effect,” Bhatti said. “Anybody who had received a call was telling people that the DCO had called” and was interpreting the gesture from the country’s elite cadre of civil servants as a promise of change. Bhatti could sense the excitement in citizens’ voices when he called. It reassured him. “Goodwill is a very powerful force when you apply it. You can take more action against bad people,” he said.

National press coverage of Bhatti’s initiative caught the attention of Shahbaz Sharif, Chief Minister of Punjab, who was eager to expand the model to other districts across the province. Sharif saw the program as a step toward addressing the petty corruption that infected service provision in Punjab—then home to almost 95 million people, or roughly half of Pakistan’s population—as well as the rest of the country. In a nationwide survey by Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer in 2010, two years after Bhatti began to innovate, half of all respondents

reported paying bribes for delivery of public services during the previous year.²

Despite its broad impact on individual Pakistanis, petty corruption had received little attention from provincial and national anticorruption agencies, which instead concentrated on high-profile cases. The National Accountability Bureau, established in 2000 to investigate and prosecute cases of corruption, focused on public office holders and sophisticated white-collar crime. Although Pakistan's four federal provinces had their own directorates of anticorruption to conduct criminal investigations, those provincial directorates also targeted major abuses of public office.

Expanding Bhatti's citizen feedback model to other parts of the province enabled the government to identify corruption and poor performance at the point of service delivery to citizens.

THE CHALLENGE

Scaling up Bhatti's model beyond Jhang presented multiple challenges. The first was to find someone to manage the process. Few district-level officials in Pakistan remained in their positions for more than a year, and the constant rotation within the civil service raised hurdles to long-term planning and implementation.

Bhatti was out of the picture, at least for the time being. Even as he experimented with his calling program, he had decided to leave government. He was a career officer who had joined the Pakistan Administrative Service 15 years earlier. A former journalist, he had earned a degree in public policy at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School. He told the chief minister he planned to move to the private sector in July 2008. Although the chief minister asked him to stay on, he declined, though he did not lose interest in his experiment in Jhang.

Whoever assumed responsibility for the expansion had to persuade 36 potentially skeptical

district coordination officers across Punjab province that making personal telephone calls to citizens was a worthwhile investment in terms of time and expense. Expanding the citizen feedback model from one man sitting at his desk with a telephone to a provincial program covering far more services and a far larger population presented serious logistical and technical challenges, few of which Bhatti and Sharif anticipated at the time.

Higher-ranking officials in the district administration generally viewed public complaints as unreliable and often incorrect. The extremely competitive market for civil service jobs in district facilities such as the property registration office had turned the complaints system into a tool for knocking out potential competitors.

Local politicians and other influential people—prominent landowners and businesspeople, for instance—lobbied district coordination officers to appoint their friends and supporters to local positions. Sometimes one side would file false complaints to damage the reputations of rivals. Gulzar Shah, who was director of anticorruption in Punjab in 2007 before being district coordination officer in three different districts, described the difficult situation upper management faced. “Even if a DCO thinks of appointing to any of these offices a person who he believes enjoys a good reputation, he will soon receive a malicious public complaint from the opposite camp accusing the DCO of being biased and politically motivated,” Shah said. Such unfounded and malicious public complaints had shaken the faith of district officials in the public complaint system.

The organizational and technical requirements for provincewide expansion of Bhatti's cell phone spot checks also demanded careful thought. Phoning or texting thousands of citizens each day required staff, facilities, and a budget to cover service charges. Further, the call agents had to have special training to develop the

trust required to collect accurate and useful citizen feedback.

Taking appropriate action was a final challenge that in some ways was more difficult than collecting and analyzing citizen feedback. In order to create credibility with the public, the provincial government had to break with past practice and remove corrupt officials quickly.

“If you look at anticorruption files, you will be surprised to come across names of many district land registry officials who are facing anticorruption inquiries that have still not been finalized,” said Gulzar Shah. “The process is just too slow.”

Moreover, accused officials sometimes interfered with the process by contacting complainants directly or by asking local intermediaries and elders to resolve the matter. Some also turned to local political patrons to influence the course of the corruption investigation.

Expanding the Jhang experiment would require new ways of working that sometimes conflicted with existing practices and expectations. And introduction of the expansion demanded careful attention to design as well as a lot of persuasion and political skill.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

After Bhatti left the district government in 2008, the chief minister’s office put the idea of expanding the Jhang experiment on the back burner. Public interest in the citizen feedback model remained, however. During the following two years, Ansar Abassi, a widely read national correspondent for Pakistan’s leading newspaper, *The News*, published a series of articles that questioned why the government had not moved forward with the idea. (Abassi’s initial coverage of Jhang’s citizen outreach model had piqued the chief minister’s interest earlier.)

Bhatti also continued to ponder the challenges of expanding the Jhang experiment

throughout Punjab province even after he left the civil service. In August 2008, he entered his citizen feedback project in an international competition on innovation sponsored by *The Economist* magazine. “I did not win but was surprised to receive an e-mail from the magazine requesting my permission to use the story in an upcoming report on mobile telecommunication in developing countries,” he said.³

The article appeared in September 2009, and the international recognition boosted Bhatti’s hopes for scaling up the Jhang model. Less than 18 months after leaving government, Bhatti was back at work on the Citizen Feedback Monitoring Program, or CFMP. He had left the private sector for the Asia Foundation, a nongovernmental organization that works across the Asia-Pacific region on governance, economic reform, and sustainable development. Based in the Asia Foundation’s Islamabad office, he was in a position to revive the idea of a provincewide citizen feedback program.

Bhatti met again with Chief Minister Sharif and his staff, some of whom were supportive colleagues from the Pakistan Administrative Service. The chief minister agreed to scale up the CFMP in Punjab with Bhatti’s assistance.

In March 2010, the provincial government asked The Asia Foundation to give Bhatti two months’ leave to help with the project. Within a month, Bhatti found himself working from a sofa in Nabeel Awan’s office in the chief minister’s secretariat. Nabeel, a Pakistan Administrative Service officer, was an early proponent of the CFMP and would later pioneer the program in Punjab’s Gujranwala district as a DCO.

Bhatti had a tough assignment. The chief minister had a reputation for being a taskmaster who set challenging targets for the provincial administration. Nabeel had told Bhatti that Sharif would wholeheartedly back the project only if it covered the entire province and reached thousands of citizens daily.

Sharif's political will provided important support for Bhatti in rolling out the CFMP across Punjab's districts. The secretary to the chief minister, Tauqir Shah (no relationship to Gulzar Shah), made it clear to the upper echelons of the provincial administration that the chief minister considered the project a priority initiative.

To expand the program across Punjab's 36 districts, Bhatti had to find a way to contact large numbers of citizens and collect their feedback. Jhang's system, which relied on the district coordination officer and a few staffers to make calls and log information, could not handle large amounts of information from hundreds of thousands of citizens. Bhatti quickly realized he needed a replicable model that relied heavily on automation. He also knew he had to pilot the expansion in a few districts before he could roll it out across the province. He needed districts that would embrace the program enthusiastically rather than just comply with requirements set by a provincial administrative mandate. To find districts willing to test the initiative as well as to build buy-in across the province as a whole, Bhatti presented his ideas to groups of district coordination officers and provincial commissioners, most of whom were Pakistan Administrative Service officers he knew. (Provinces in Pakistan are subdivided into divisions comprising three or four districts each and headed by a commissioner.)

In his presentations, which began in April 2010, Bhatti was careful to distinguish the citizen feedback program from existing electronic complaint systems or hotlines. The goal was not to create an electronic channel for citizens to file complaints but, rather, to approach citizens who used public services and get both positive and negative feedback. "If a restaurant can ask its patrons for feedback, why can't the government ask its citizens?" he asked.

In those presentations, Bhatti also made it clear that the goal of the program was to provide

the foundation for administrative action rather than to help build criminal cases against those suspected of corruption. If the program could identify a pattern of poor performance or persistent negative feedback, district coordination officers would be able to change management practices or transfer, suspend, or reprimand officials.

"We have what we call efficiency and discipline rules in the bureaucracy, [but] unfortunately, there is more emphasis on discipline and very little on efficiency," Bhatti said. With the data from direct citizen contacts, district coordination officers could take action in the name of efficiency. Rather than aiming to eliminate corruption, the objective was to use citizen feedback to reduce the frequency of petty corruption and poor delivery in public service transactions.

Following the presentations, several district coordination officers within the Gujranwala and Bahawalpur divisions volunteered to implement the citizen feedback program. Tauqir Shah persuaded the Gujranwala and Bahawalpur commissioners to bring the other districts in their divisions on board. As a result, Bhatti had a pilot group of six districts: Gujranwala, Sialkot, and Narowal from the Gujranwala division, and Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar, and Rahim Yar Khan from the Bahawalpur division.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Development of the citizen feedback model was a process of trial and error that went through many changes of personnel and processes.

Learning from the pilot

The pilot program took off quickly. The six districts that had signed on to the citizen feedback model in April 2010 started to collect the cell phone numbers of citizens who used selected district services. Initially, the pilot districts sent lists of numbers to Bhatti, who, from his seat in

the chief minister's secretariat, made random calls and collected actionable feedback for the DCOs, including any patterns of reported corruption and invalid numbers.

After hearing recordings of Bhatti's calls, the pilot district coordination officers and some of their staff members soon took responsibility for placing the calls. Their experiences left a positive impression on both ends of the communication. "Citizens were so surprised on receiving a call that it took some time to explain to them why I called," said Waqas Ali Mahmood, one of the first district coordination officers to volunteer for the CFMP.

Nabeel, who had just become district coordination officer of Gujranwala district, was the first to use the feedback system to take action. When his citizen contacts reported problems in the Gujranwala property registration branch, he initiated anticorruption investigations that resulted in the arrest of some of the staff at the office. Wide media coverage of the incident helped spread word of the new program and explain to the public how the system worked. As the pilot program gained traction, the volume of calls increased, and four more districts joined.

In June 2010, the chief minister transferred operation of the CFMP to Rashid Mehmood, the provincial secretary for implementation and coordination. Harvard-educated Mehmood had recently set up a provincial information-analysis unit based on his experience in monitoring primary schools in the province while working with a World Bank project. A committee that included Bhatti oversaw implementation of the CFMP.

With technical assistance from the Punjab Information Technology Board, the provincial organization charged with deploying information technology in government operations, Mehmood introduced Web-based data entry of citizen cell phone data from pilot districts. System network administrators in the districts regularly posted the

information online—sometimes with help from other data-entry operators in other district agencies. The provincial information analysis unit also developed a detailed Web-based form to capture citizen feedback obtained through calls from district officials.

As expected, early problems surfaced in the pilot program, and managers had to learn and adapt. Although the provincial information-analysis unit had developed a detailed online feedback form to capture citizen feedback, DCOs still placed manual calls to citizens and often failed to record feedback online. In addition to their regular duties, DCOs were expected to call about 5% of the telephone numbers collected daily—in absolute terms much more than a few random calls. They struggled with the growing work burden. Further, not all officials were comfortable with the idea of making personal phone calls to citizens.

It was evident that the CFMP had design problems, and Bhatti, who had left The Asia Foundation in July 2010 for the World Bank's Islamabad office, found a way to help. Each year, the World Bank hosted a competition for support from its innovation fund. In partnership with the Punjab provincial administration, Bhatti developed a proposal entitled *Proactive Governance: The Punjab Model*.

The innovation fund, which supported pilot projects that increased transparency and access to information, accepted the proposal and granted the project US\$100,000 for technical assistance. Although the province never used the full amount, the grant would help overcome some of the technical design challenges the pilot project had revealed.

Adapting and preparing to scale up

When Mehmood transferred to a different provincial government post in October 2010, the citizen feedback program quickly lost traction. To maintain momentum, the chief minister's

secretariat moved the CFMP back to its office. Noor Mengal, additional secretary in the chief minister's secretariat, took over logistics, including liaison with the pilot districts. Mengal pushed districts for prompt reporting of citizen cell phone numbers, calls made by DCOs, and progress made to the secretariat.

Mengal needed people to help him fulfill his aim to strengthen and expand the CFMP, and his need was answered quickly by two young computer experts. The first was Fasih Mehta, an information technology professional who had worked in the CFMP in the provincial information-analysis unit under Mehmood. Mehta had moved to the Punjab Information Technology Board, where he had become the focal person for CFMP.

Bhatti knew the chief minister's secretariat and the technology board still needed some help to get the program up and running because both had many other responsibilities. He had met Asim Fayaz, a computer science graduate from Lahore University of Management Sciences, while giving a talk on the idea of the citizen feedback model in Lahore. In January 2011, Bhatti used the World Bank's innovation funds to engage Fayaz and a few other young computer science graduates in Lahore to work with the chief minister's office and the technology board.

Mehta and the team of World Bank–paid consultants led by Fayaz had the job of managing the interface of the citizen feedback program inside and outside the provincial government. Mehta provided the much-needed focus and coordination between the technology board, districts, and outside vendors with respect to the CFMP. He led the implementation from the technology board side, and the World Bank consultants supported him by acting as the liaison between the districts and the chief minister's secretariat.

In January 2011, the technology board engaged Pakistan Telecommunication Company,

a former public sector utility that had been privatized, to operate a call center that would effectively handle the growing scale and scope of the CFMP in the province. The technology board provided the funding, and Mehta and the consultants coordinated operational issues with respect to the call center.

Almost immediately, the team had to handle a potentially crippling problem. The government had no experience in procuring call center services. It did not have the exact technical specification for what it wanted other than the broad contours of a call center and an online dashboard to collect, collate, and view citizen feedback. The Pakistan Telecommunication Company got the contract because it had been the lowest bidder on the project, but the company had no experience in running a call center that could make outbound calls or in designing and building online dashboards. The company had to recruit and train a staff, develop scripts for call agents to use, build an online system for entering information acquired from the citizen phone conversations, and provide a dashboard for capturing and displaying citizen feedback.

Challenges began to mount as poorly specified technical requirements in the contract created troubles for Pakistan Telecommunication Company's Chinese partner firm that was responsible for designing the online dashboard. The Chinese firm found it difficult to understand the local context and the requirements, and progress slowed on the dashboard development. "We lost a lot of momentum," Bhatti said.

Some creative adaptation enabled the call center to continue to function despite the absence of the dashboard. Mehta and the team of consultants stepped in to develop a workaround. By April 2011, Fayaz had come up with an alternative to the struggling call center operation. He developed an automated text messaging service (short message service, or SMS) that could send text messages to citizens' cell phones, asking

for feedback. Citizens could reply by texting. In parallel, the team developed a basic dashboard that could store, categorize, and display citizens' cell phone numbers and their text replies.

The team developed a new website for district-based offices to enter citizens' cell phone numbers and information about the services they used. For service providers in remote areas that had no access to the Internet or computers, the site facilitated data input directly to the website via cell phone texting.

Then, via a simple Excel spreadsheet, the team would transmit the numbers to the call center. The call center employees made calls, entered the feedback on the spreadsheet, and sent it to the team for analysis. The team took charge of analyzing the dashboard data and providing reports on actionable feedback for the chief minister's secretariat and district coordinating officers.

Although the call center made it possible to contact many more people than the district coordination officers could reach, it had drawbacks. The people hired to place calls (call agents) lacked the skills and knowledge needed to converse with citizens on specific aspects of many kinds of service transactions. Mehta and the consultants developed scripts to improve the quality of the dialogue, but the scripts did not give agents the flexibility and time to probe specific issues.

The burgeoning operational cost of the call center was a looming problem. No one had a clear idea of the expected call volumes as the scope of the CFMP expanded. An average three-minute agent call cost 5 rupees (about 5 US cents). Rising call volumes were bound to put financial pressure on a project that was still being run on ad hoc funds. The team searched for alternatives to direct calling.

SMS texting provided comparable reach at lower cost. A 160-character text message cost 80 paisa (less than 1 US cent). Texting had other

advantages. Unlike a live call, SMS did not require an immediate response, thereby allowing citizens time to share and discuss the questions with others. Text replies could be stored more easily and accurately for analysis than audio recordings could. Texting also had political value for the government because every outbound message included a greeting from the chief minister.

Initial trials with SMS messaging in 2011 gave citizens a simple choice for reporting their service experience: "Press 1 for 'corruption' or Press 2 for 'no corruption.'" Coding facilitated automatic and easy data analysis. However, the choice of 1 or 2 was susceptible to erroneous replies and did not let citizens explain the contexts of their service transactions. "Top officials were really not interested in seeing a lot of 1s and 2s," said Bhatti. The team decided to leave citizen responses open-ended to allow for a full understanding of the quality of the service experience.

By July 2011, the relationship with the Pakistan Telecommunication Company had deteriorated to the point that the call center stopped making calls, and the operation relied entirely on the SMS system to keep the CFMP alive. By that time, 15 districts had joined the project, and the call center had made about 9,000 calls. The SMS feedback system had recorded an additional 5,000 text message responses and was growing fast.

The numbers indicated citizens were responding to the program.

Expanding the program

Despite continuing problems, by June 2011 the team members felt they had collected enough citizen feedback to pitch a full province-wide rollout to the chief minister and his Cabinet. "Being able to operationalize CFM [the citizen feedback model] in 15 of the 36 districts in the pilot phase was an achievement, and we had

enough material for a presentation to the Cabinet,” said Bhatti, who was invited to the meeting. In their pitch, the team members highlighted the positive feedback they had received from many citizens in the 15 participating districts. In the calls played at the meeting, respondents thanked the chief minister and said they were grateful for the respect they felt the government was showing the citizenry by asking for feedback. The team also showed how the information could improve governance, describing an instance in which calls had led to disciplinary action against the staff of one district’s property registration branch.

The Cabinet approved a full rollout.

As the project expanded, the team debated whether to target specific public services. “Public services that involved a high number of service transactions, involved little discretion, followed a laid-out procedure, and delivered a clear output were considered most suitable,” said Nabeel, the district coordination officer of Gujranwala. Certain other services were difficult to monitor. Questions involving police emergency response, for instance, asked only whether the police had responded in a timely manner. Team members decided to avoid asking about citizen satisfaction because of the highly discretionary and context-dependent nature of police emergency response.

In February 2012, the contract with the Pakistan Telecommunication Company expired and the Punjab Information Technology Board negotiated a new contract with TRG, the country’s largest call-center firm. The TRG deal provided dedicated voice and text message services for the government. The company agreed to staff the center with 20 call agents and to refine and operate the online dashboard system. Mehta and Fayaz’s team would focus on creating call scripts, training call agents, and monitoring compliance at the TRG call center.

Umar Saif, formerly a professor of computer science at Lahore University of Management

Sciences, was appointed chairman of the technology board. With an ambitious agenda to introduce e-governance reforms in the province, Saif was enthusiastic about the citizen feedback program and ensured full support of the technology board in its implementation.

Saif took several actions that cleared the way for the expansion of the CFMP. Importantly, he ensured that TRG’s contract had none of the shortcomings of its failed predecessor that had created so much extra work. And recognizing the potential for communication gaps between the technically oriented technology board and leaders of the monitoring program, he cultivated a partnership with Bhatti, Nabeel, and other DCOs.

To streamline the calling process, the new call center used prerecorded so-called robo calls in the chief minister’s voice, a tactic that offered several advantages. The robo calls were effective in conveying the impression that the chief minister was personally talking to each citizen. Robo calls could be quickly made to all numbers. The computerized calls also gave advance notice to citizens about incoming text messages that would request their feedback and helped in filtering phone numbers that were repeated or were invalid.

The work of the call center was divided between monitoring the integrity of the cell phone data provided by districts (filtering invalid or spurious numbers), collecting and classifying SMS replies, and making agent calls when SMS replies indicated the possibility of corruption or when citizens texted requests to speak with a live person.

The team developed an easily recognizable four-digit code from which it sent the SMS messages, and the provincial government mounted an information campaign around the four-digit code to inform citizens about the importance of CFMP and the value of their responses.

Analyzing and acting

In 2012, Nabeel, who had been one of the first district coordination officers to pilot the citizen feedback model, returned to provincial government and became the chief minister's special secretary for implementation. In that role, he assumed responsibility for coordination and implementation of the CFMP in the chief minister's office. Nabeel took a strong interest in analyzing the provincewide data. "Once or twice a week, [the team of consultants] would come to my office with CFM reports on all districts," Nabeel said. "We would sit down for an hour and go over them and identify unusual trends or patterns."

From that informal reporting, the team developed a formal-reporting template that logged the volume of data (the number of cell numbers reported), the integrity of the data (the percentage of invalid or repeated cell phone numbers among the reported numbers), and the content of the feedback. The online dashboard allowed the data to be viewed at the district and service facility levels.

The team used the information to assess whether districts were meeting their obligations under the citizen feedback program. Scant or no data from a particular facility or service center indicated implementation shortcomings. Unusual spikes in repeat numbers or invalid numbers from a service facility or a district likely suggested an attempt to avoid detection.

"To my mind, if a service provider at a particular facility is consistently providing invalid or repeat numbers or underreporting compared with the rest, that provides enough grounds to initiate administrative action against the officer for inefficiency," said Waqas Ali Mahmood, former district coordination officer of Narowal district. When the team identified such anomalies, Nabeel would report them to the chief secretary—the provincial official in charge of the civil service in the province—and the relevant division commissioner. The chief secretary and

commissioners would press the district coordination officer to respond to the problem. "It was a mix of persuasion and administrative fiat," Nabeel said.

By the end of 2012, the program had sent almost 1.5 million text messages to citizens across the province. The citizen feedback program not only had become a monitoring and accountability tool but also was earning public goodwill for the chief minister through his "personalized" robo calls.

In January 2013, the chief minister directed the chief secretary to make the review of citizen feedback data a permanent agenda item at his monthly meeting with district coordination officers. Nabeel and Bhatti made the initial presentations at the meetings, emphasizing to the district coordination officers how the citizen feedback program was different from a public complaint system. They used quantity, integrity, and quality (content) indicators to prod lagging districts to improve implementation of the CFMP. "I remember when I first saw the bar graph PowerPoint of citizen-reported corruption across districts in Punjab at the DCO meeting," Gulzar Shah said. "Once having seen that visual, all DCOs knew that they had to take CFM seriously."

Saif, chairman of the technology board, echoed the importance of the presentations: "Although implementation of CFM is not formally part of the evaluation of a DCO's performance, it does convey an impression about a DCO to the chief secretary in the meeting."

Because the provincial government was interested in knowing whether the district coordination officers took any administrative action in response to citizen feedback, TRG upgraded the online dashboard to include an "action-taken" screen. District coordination officers could choose from an automated list of actions and input scans of any relevant paperwork as evidence.

The scale of the project and the growing number of SMS messages and agent calls created unanticipated financial demands. Until 2013, the project had drawn funds from other technology board projects and occasional government grants. Indecision about where to house the project contributed to uncertainty in funding.

In March 2013 the chief minister's secretariat decided to turn the citizen feedback model into an independent development project with its own budget and placed it once again under the provincial Department for Implementation and Coordination. Under the new arrangement, the provincial implementation and coordination department became the administrative department, with the Punjab Information Technology Board retaining oversight over technical operations through Mehta. The team of consultants led by Ali Inam, who succeeded Fayaz, continued to assist in implementation through coordination with Nadeem Mehboob, who took over as secretary of the implementation and coordination department, the Punjab Information Technology Board, and the TRG call center.

Recognizing the program's political benefits and mindful of the approaching May 2013 elections, the chief minister's office continued its strong support for implementation of the citizen feedback model. However, the team had to stop using the chief minister's voice in robo calls because election rules prevented public office holders from using public resources for advertising their names during election campaigns.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The citizen feedback program hit a number of hurdles during its implementation, including leadership transitions, local political opposition, a legal challenge, and additional contracting problems.

Withstanding patronage pressures

Throughout the implementation process, the citizen feedback program brought district coordination officers head to head with local political interests as they worked to respond to citizens and make services more efficient.

In Punjab, as well as across Pakistan, members of national and provincial legislatures commonly rewarded their local political supporters by lobbying the district offices to place them in jobs. "The pressure builds up from the influential constituents of local politicians and is transmitted to the DCO and even to the chief minister to comply with their demands," said Gulzar Shah.

Gulzar Shah, who was district coordination officer in three different districts in the Punjab provincial administration said he thought that if the CFMP had stayed in the pilot phase for a longer period of time in one or a few districts, local interests might have joined forces to undermine it. Rapid scale-up to the provincial level did not allow time for local patronage networks to mount any type of concerted resistance against the CFMP.

The data from citizens' feedback empowered both the district coordination officers and the chief minister's office to withstand many of those pressures. The notion of a distant call center's instantly conveying actual citizen perceptions about district service facilities and service providers to the district coordination officers and the chief minister sent a powerful message to local politicians. Many were hesitant to challenge the new system and confront the chief minister. "I would show them a three-page-long list of negative citizen feedback coming out of CFMP about a public servant, telling them that the chief minister has the same information, and they would not pursue the issue anymore," said Gulzar Shah.

Waqas Ali Mahmood, for example, invited public representatives of the Narowal district to his office to explain why he was taking action against district employees based on citizen feedback. He explained the entire citizen feedback monitoring process. “Once they saw how it operated, their reaction was not adversarial,” Mahmood said. “Local politicians only agitate if they perceive that the standard being applied to them is unfair.”

Nabeel recounted a similar situation in the chief minister’s office that involved opposition to the transfer of a well-connected public servant in a district by his local patrons. When shown the consistently negative citizen feedback against the individual, the powerful local patrons gave up their demand.

The CFMP also faced local resistance from another quarter. In 2010, the deed writers in Gujranwala, who acted as middlemen in facilitating property registrations and who profited from citizens’ lack of understanding of the registration process, approached the provincial high court claiming that Nabeel, the district coordination officer at the time, had no legal authority to ask for citizens’ cell phone numbers during registration. “These guys were hurting,” Bhatti said. “That’s good evidence of impact.”

It was true that there was no legal provision explicitly authorizing the policy. An adverse ruling by the court on the case would have applied to the entire province. Nabeel told the court it was his executive prerogative to ask citizens whether they were satisfied with the service provided. He argued that the district was only asking for citizens’ cell phone numbers and not denying public services if citizens declined to provide the information.

The provincial high court agreed with Nabeel, and the decision stifled any further efforts to challenge the program on legal grounds.

Handling a leadership transition

The Pakistan Muslim League, which governed Punjab, won national elections in May 2013 and set an ambitious countrywide agenda. As a result, the provincial government had new priorities that sidelined the citizen feedback program. A severe energy crisis and concerns about terrorism by religious militant groups in the country required immediate attention and stronger coordination with the federal government.

Nabeel’s departure for a post in the prime minister’s office deprived the CFMP of a high-placed champion in provincial government as well as sustained operational support from the chief minister’s secretariat. The provincial planning board, the body responsible for approving the CFMP as a formally funded development project, raised uncertainty about finances by taking longer than expected to give approval.

Those factors slowed implementation of CFMP and resulted in a downturn in reporting volumes from the districts. The number of citizen cell phone numbers reported every month by service providers, a proxy of implementation on the ground, fell to 260,000 in November 2013 compared with the average monthly reporting volume of 280,000.

As chairman of the technology board, Saif provided leadership for the project during this period. Saif had become a powerful champion of the program, and he kept the focus on design issues while troubleshooting funding and contracting issues with the TRG call center. The World Bank helped secure additional financing from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) so the team of consultants could continue working through 2014 with the technology board and the provincial government. In return, the CFMP provided citizen feedback data on public services in districts of the province

where DFID was running a subnational government service delivery program.

Turning reports into action

By the end of 2013, many district coordination officers had lost enthusiasm for the citizen feedback model, according to Inam, the lead World Bank consultant to the project that year. Some officers said their requests to customize the program to serve their districts' needs were not adequately addressed by the Lahore team. And others still viewed the program as a public complaint mechanism. "It had a lot to do with dashboard design," Inam said. "The dashboard appeared like a roster of citizen complaints to the DCO when he logged on. It did not reflect broader trends or patterns in feedback that would allow for a more systematic response." The addition of more public services and the creation of new classification categories for SMS responses cluttered the dashboard. Furthermore, the push by the chief minister's office for implementation meant some district coordination officers saw the program as a tool for monitoring their performance rather than an instrument for improving public service delivery.

Nadeem Mehboob described the situation. "DCOs are told that it is not a complaint mechanism, and they should not follow conventional procedures. But there is turnover of DCOs and some 'best-practice' manual should be created to guide new DCOs about using CFM," he said. The critical task was to reengage with the DCOs to improve design and halt the decline in the reporting numbers.

In December 2013, the technology board, with support from World Bank consultants, began creating monthly summary reports of citizen feedback for each district. The reports showed the percentage of citizens reporting corruption during the month (including their text messages), a comparative analysis of previous months' reporting volumes, the percentage of repeated or

invalid numbers, and the percentage of negative feedback. The reports also identified service facilities in the district that had reported the highest percentage of such incidents.

Mehboob also began sending weekly letters to individual district coordination officers, pointing out unusual patterns in the volume, integrity, and quality indicators for specific services and requesting necessary action. Less tech-savvy DCOs no longer had to go through scattered data on the online dashboard to glean actionable information. The technology board also created a helpline for the district coordination officers that linked them directly to the project managers for any relevant questions.

In April 2014, team members added new features to the system. They began sending weekly SMS alerts to the cell phones of district coordination officers and executive district officers, who are in charge of essential public services in the district and who report to the DCOs. The SMS alert indicated which service facilities in a district were reporting the lowest levels of data entry or the highest levels of negative feedback.

The team also brought citizens into the monitoring loop. They began sending SMS messages to citizens in districts where at least five administrative actions were taken during a month based on citizen feedback, thanking citizens for helping improve public services.

The team was hesitant, however, to publicize the citizen feedback itself. Many citizens expected privacy when they responded to questions. The feedback data required more analysis and screening before any part of it could be made public. "I think in the first few years, we had been so involved in the logistical challenges of CFMP that we never got around to the question of making CFMP data public," Nabeel said.

The changes had an immediate impact. In May 2014, the program recorded the highest entry of cell phone numbers across all services in

the province: 333,000 cell phone numbers were reported compared with 260,000 in November 2013.

To share information across the districts, in April 2014 the technology board began development of a monthly bulletin on the citizen feedback model. The board plans to circulate the bulletin among the district coordination officers to create senses of both competition and shared purpose by identifying top-performing districts in the province and best practices in improving service delivery.

Contracting limitations and expanding costs

As the program expanded, the technology board's contract with TRG turned out to be inadequate. The contract required TRG to develop 25 different reporting templates for the dashboard as part of software development. But TRG considered any changes in those templates or requests for new templates (beyond the 25) as an additional request not covered by the contract and therefore subject to additional costs.

The CFMP's growth and evolution required new data templates, and some district coordination officers were frustrated that the online dashboard could not provide them with easy access to specific information about the quality of service delivery in their districts. DCOs also complained that the dashboard did not show clearly any patterns or comparative trends, nor did it allow quick scoping down to the service facility level.

"We had requests from some DCOs to add particular features to the dashboard to suit their needs, and we wanted the reporting features to be more versatile, but the contract constrained us," Inam said. The technology board and the consultants decided to redesign the dashboard themselves. A mock-up version of a new dashboard was shown to some DCOs, who gave their input on how to improve it. The project team planned to pilot the new version of the

dashboard in a few districts that volunteer to pilot it and eventually roll it out across the province after buy-in from the pilot districts. Given the challenges in dealing with external vendors, the technology board's thinking started to move toward developing in-house software development capacity for CFMP to handle such demands in the future.

ASSESSING RESULTS

By 2014, what had started in 2008 as an initiative by one district coordination officer to directly connect with citizens via cell phones had spread to all 36 districts in Punjab, serving a population of more than 100 million and covering 16 different public services.⁴ The Citizen Feedback Monitoring Program operated through an outsourced call center that made calls and sent text messages to the cell phones of citizens who had used any of the 16 services, inquiring about their experience during the service transaction.

The CFMP enabled district coordination officers, provincial officials, and the chief minister of the province to gather feedback and understand citizens' perceptions about service delivery by viewing an online dashboard. Monthly district reports highlighted trends in citizens' perceptions of public services and identified for administrative action any extreme cases of poor service or corruption.

As of February 2014, 3.5 million SMS requests for feedback had been sent to citizens, with 12,000 more being sent every day. More than 400,000 citizens had responded.

In April 2014, the World Bank commissioned the first evaluation designed to measure the performance and impact of the CFMP. "Because the CFM developed very organically, we never thought of establishing baselines and benchmarks," said Nabeel Awan, a Pakistan Administrative Service official and former DCO. The phone-based survey covered more than 20,000 citizens who had used CFMP

services since 2011. In August, preliminary results showed that more than half (55%) of citizens surveyed said overall service delivery had improved; 71% said staff attitude had improved; and 63% said timeliness of service delivery had improved. Only 30% of those surveyed said the program had reduced corruption, but 76% of the respondents said they still believed it would help reduce the problem in the future.

Although it was too early to know whether the program had brought deeper and long-lasting changes in service delivery, Gulzar Shah said the initiative had broad public support and that it would be hard for future governments to roll back the program. In the evaluation survey, almost 90% of the respondents said the CFMP helped build trust between citizens and the state and improved the image of the government.

Indeed, as of late 2014, the program had withstood significant resistance from influential interests that had investments in the status quo. “When the CFMP started operating in the district, no one saw it as a threat. It seemed very innocuous . . . the DCO making just a few calls to citizens to cultivate goodwill created very few ripples” Gulzar Shah said. “I personally never thought there would be a call center somewhere where citizen feedback would be recorded and analyzed with a constant data stream coming to the DCO and the chief minister,” he added, surprised at the speed at which the CFMP had expanded and developed.

Successful implementation in Punjab encouraged other provinces to consider implementing their own versions of the CFMP. “Because the model was not excessively politicized, other provinces feel comfortable in adopting it,” said Fayaz. The province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa adopted the model in 2013 after learning from the Punjab experience.

In October 2014, as part of a phased program, the federal government replicated the CFMP platform for federal services such as

passport and national identity card registration. The federal government was able to negotiate a price of 8 paise (less than one-tenth of a US cent) per SMS, opening the prospect of price reductions that would make the CFMP financially more feasible for provinces.

REFLECTIONS

The underlying principle of the Citizen Feedback Monitoring Program—that the province should actively seek out citizens to ask them about their experiences with service delivery—was revolutionary in Punjab.

On the government side, the model allowed for both positive and negative feedback and a way to systematically measure the quality of service delivery across Punjab. The daily data collection provided a near-real-time picture of civil service performance, thereby enabling the provincial government to react quickly and effectively to favorable or adverse trends in remote districts. Though the program did not eliminate principal-agent problems between the provincial government and the district coordination officers or between the district coordination officers and their subordinates, the data enabled informed responses to identifiable performance problems.

For citizens, the program affirmed their importance as customers of state service providers and gave them a voice in how things got done. One citizen wrote in response to the SMS questionnaire, “Respected Sir, your message transported [me] to an imaginary land and filled me with delight and jubilation on the check and balance introduced by the government. Nothing like [it] has happened with me before.”⁵ And because the program’s robo calls used the voice of the chief minister, many citizens felt as if they had access to the highest echelons of provincial government.

In late 2014, Zubair Bhatti, who developed the citizen outreach model while head of Jhang district in Pakistan’s Punjab province, hoped the

program would continue to expand and adapt. “You can say this is just about petty corruption, but you can do it in many, many different ways,” he said. “I think, if one big benefit comes out of it, it could be the simple idea that officers learn that they can just pick up the phone and call people up and get feedback about things. It could be anything. It could be a road, it could be a school, it could be a hospital, it could be provision of electricity . . . They have this architecture available where they can get in touch with people.”

Building the political momentum to support expansion of the CFMP required a tailored approach on the parts of Bhatti and, later, the Punjab Information Technology Board. At the highest levels, they let the citizens do the talking. “It was important to show the overlap of politics, citizens, and service delivery to the Chief Minister and the Cabinet,” Bhatti said. By telling the CFMP story through the many positive SMS messages received from citizens thanking the government and the chief minister for contacting them, proponents of the program created highly persuasive arguments in favor of continuing the program. “We did not want to go into corruption numbers or percentages in front of the chief minister and his cabinet,” said World Bank consultant Asim Fayaz. “It would have been immediately challenged and become controversial. Instead, we focused on what was happening on the ground after CFM was implemented.”

For the districts, the CFMP team portrayed the program as a tool for communication, deterrence, and taking action. “The citizens are happy that the DCO of the district is calling them and that front-end-service officials are deterred, knowing that DCO is in touch with citizens. Plus, the DCO feels empowered because he has access to unadulterated feedback on public services,” Nabeel Awan, a Pakistan Administrative Service official, said.

Media perceptions of the project helped align with the good-governance narrative of the

provincial government and the anticorruption narrative in the national press. More important, according to technology board chairman Umar Saif, media publicity was critical in attracting volunteer DCOs and local champions from within the government to support implementation on the ground and to run pilots.

Bhatti deliberately chose to rely on a small implementation team rather than create administrative bloat within the provincial government if the project failed. “What is the value of adding another 500 or 200 people to the payroll? The saddest things for me as a civil servant are the carcasses of hundreds of ideas strewn across the government and creating liabilities,” Bhatti said. “We said not one single extra person other than the outsourced consultants, which we can cancel today, finished, gone home.”

The CFMP was designed to be financially viable for the districts. The provincial government paid for all call center expenses. Any financial burden might have discouraged districts from adopting the program. “An abiding principle in the CFM project has been to operate under a hard budget constraint,” Bhatti said.

Service providers could have resisted by not entering data or by entering incorrect data to undermine CFMP. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the CFMP did not engage a third party to enter citizen data; it relied on the same officials who were being monitored. It made them responsible for integrity of the data because the technology could easily identify invalid numbers and point to the official responsible.

Looking back at how CFM evolved in Punjab, Bhatti said, it was important to show results very quickly. “The DCOs have short tenures in the districts and would show interest only if results are quickly visible,” he said. “Second, I think that in government we do not stick with an idea long enough and develop it iteratively. That is why we fail.”

Commenting on the unconventional way CFM was implemented, Saif said: “I would not have done it any differently. It was a hack-based approach; get it on the road without a lot of theorizing. People want to see demonstrative results. Only then would they take it seriously.”

When the team members began implementation, they did not understand the technical requirements for provincewide expansion, and progress came largely through trial and error. “It was not a very glamorous process,” Saif said. The team had to experiment with new technologies without halting implementation and expansion. That approach required civil servants who were willing to volunteer their offices and districts as test cases for repeated trials and modifications.

Others, like Fayaz and his successor, Ali Inam, held a different view. “The flexibility allowed us to experiment and improve, but we should not keep it too open-ended,” Fayaz said. “All the threads need to converge at some point; otherwise, we would leave loose ends, like the dashboard design.” Ali said, “We need to distinguish between scaling up an idea and scaling up execution; both represent different challenges.”

It was a marriage of technology and public

administration, which, according to Saif, required building bridges with public servants in the field and carrying on a careful dialogue with them. Fayaz said institutionalization of the CFMP would gain strength if the program were integrated with the reform agendas of provincial government departments.

Throughout the implementation process, Bhatti relied on personal connections and goodwill within the Punjab civil service. “A key part of this whole story is how a small network of friends and colleagues can drive reform by being friends as well as being colleagues,” he said. “You have your personal connections, and your friendships move a public service agenda forward. That is very important. It can’t be done impersonally.”

It took courage for Bhatti to bring the largely untested citizen feedback model out of Jhang district and to Punjab province as a whole, Fayaz said. “He took it to the chief minister, and the model wasn’t perfect. Perhaps it would have been perfect as a district model, but then it would never have become the provincial model,” he said. “He would have been transferred six months later, and nobody would have known the peacock danced in the jungle.”

References

¹ District coordination officer was the top civil servant in the district. The DCO is responsible for delivery of basic public services and development programs in the district.

² http://www.transparency.org/country#PAK_PublicOpinion.

³ <http://www.economist.com/node/14483872>.

⁴ Domicile certificates, property registrations, digital land record services, hospital emergency services, rural health center services, police emergency responses, police issuance of character certificates, driver’s licenses, approval of building plans in the city of Lahore, building-completion certificates, emergency ambulance services, and recruitment of teachers (periodic).

⁵ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/20487>.



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