Appreciation Programme

Participatory Social Audit:

A Tool for Social Accountability

Module - IV

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INTRODUCTION

The unique strength of the social audit process is that it provides a space for interaction between direct beneficiaries and other stakeholders. However, it has also been realised that social audits are taking place on an ad hoc basis. In such a situation, the audits produced by the local government is informal, unprocessed and does not meet the expected standards.

In India, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts mandated the devolution of funds to local self-governments. It bestowed higher autonomy on grass-root level political institutions. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) 2005, a flagship programme of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, has a provision for mandatory social audit. This worked as a catalyst to promote social accountability in other socio-economic development programmes of the government. Recently, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (MoHUPA), Government of India, launched the Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY) that included social audit.

Similarly, in countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda governments are taking steps to promote social audits in their respective countries.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this module are to:

- Challenges that have been faced by social audits and their implementation

- Understand related issues

- Identify areas where additional initiatives are required to establish social audit as a tool that promotes social accountability.

Unit 1: Social Audits and Their Impacts

Reports of several research institutions and the accounts of the media have highlighted wide-scale non-compliance of rules and regulations. There have been incidences of corrupt practices such as manipulation of muster rolls in employment generation schemes, change of name in the beneficiary list in housing schemes, etc. One such report by the (Centre for Environment and Food Security, 2007) (CEFS) uncovered a Rs. 50 million scam in Orissa, in the MNREGS. A survey conducted by the Centre for Development Economics and Institute for Human Development in 2006 in Garhwa, Jharkhand, showed that 85 percent of MNREGS wages had disappeared. Delays in the issuance of job cards, allocation of jobs and payment of wages have been widely reported, including the report on two rounds of sample surveys done by on the 'Role of Panchayats in Implementation of NREGA' (PRIA, 2007; PRIA, 2008).

1.1 Examples Of Social Audit

With the vision of providing safe and affordable housing to urban poor, the Administrator of Chandigarh came out with the scheme "Chandigarh Small Flat Scheme 2006", for allotment of one room flats on a monthly license-fee basis. PRIA and School of Planning and Architecture - SPA (an accredited National Resource Centre, under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India) were involved in the promotion of social audit and decentralised governance in Chandigarh city in 2011. The following were the guiding principles that stipulated that the social audit in Chandigarh should

- Be owned by the local government, which would then organize ward level meetings

- Be simple and replicable

- Be non-threatening, yet should empower people

- Enable the community to assess whether a programme / scheme meets the needs and aspirations of the people

- Measure the social benefits accrued from of a programme,

- Provide critical inputs for future improvements of the programme/scheme,

- Have strong links with the administration to facilitate the institutions of the process

The first major task was the formation and training of Social Audit Committees. Local partners enhanced and supported the process and their volunteers made frequent visits to encourage the formation of Social Audit committees, which took several days to be constituted. . However, the formation was critical, as it was only then that training programmes could be commenced. The training module included developing an understanding on:

1. Social audit as not just a process, but also a methodology

2. The Basic Services To Urban Poor (BSUP) Scheme under the JnNURM

3. The Detailed Project Report (DPR), its specifications and its cost breakup

4. Roles of the Social Audit Committee with a focus on promoting participation

5. Finalising dates for the Social Audit

Training was usually undertaken in the evenings, to ensure full attendance. The training process enabled the committee members to understand the project and its specifications, ask questions, clarify issues and have access to major documents like DPRs, Beneficiary lists and Allotment lists.

The next step in the process was to conduct a Household Survey. The questionnaire for the survey was filled by two teams per settlement. Each team had a member of the Social Audit Committee and one member, from either PRIA or SPA.

Information was publicly displayed in each settlement. Complaints and responses from the residents were also accepted as inputs, to improve the reach and format of the scheme. In order that people could give their inputs, counters were set up in each of the settlements and remained open for almost 24 hours every day, for the entire week. There was an overwhelming response from the people who came to record their feedback and complaints. This procedure facilitated better awareness among the people regarding the scheme and its implementation. This meant a better understanding on the quality and cost of the amenities provided and whether the same met the expected standards, as promised by the government.

The effects of the social audit were immediate. The people were evidently empowered with their new-found knowledge to better articulate their complaints and demands to the Municipal authorities. Their access to the DPR and other documents provided clarity on the logistics of the procedure of beneficiary selection. This directly led to their voices being better heard and their demands being taken seriously.

The team met officials of the Urban Development Administration, Government of Chandigarh after the Public Consultation. They were briefed about the process, shortcomings in its implementation and the people's opinion on the programme.

The success of the process reflected in the active participation of the people. It boosted their confidence in approaching government officials with their problems. Social Audit committees took great care in making the Public Consultation as participatory as possible. At the end of the process, the social audit committee retained the display material and a copy of the DPR, for further use and reference. Though, the officials of the corporation did not make a commitment to ant kind of rectification, they actively participated in the discussions and patiently listened to the problems of the people.

1.2 Impact Of Social Audit

Some impacts of socials audit are as follows:

- Social audits have led to the enactment of Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005

- The process has unified the poor and sections of the middle class in fighting corruption

- Timely actions by competent authorities on the findings of social audits have promoted communities to organise further rounds of social audits

- Social audits have led to increased awareness regarding accountability and transparency of service providers, as well a demand for additional information on various issues

- Government agencies are now realising that social audit can promote better transparency in their functioning at various levels

Unit 2: Barriers and Challenges

The growing need for transparency, accountability and participation has led to the introduction of social audit under the housing project. Using this institutional design, many governmental and non-governmental agencies have conducted social audits in the past few years, especially after launching of Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY), albeit with different approaches and methodologies. However, it has been observed that mere statutory provisions are not sufficient to promote transparency and accountability in any programme.

2.1 Culture Of Silence

In facilitating the social audit in RAY, the culture of silence was one of the biggest bottlenecks. People are hesitant to speak up as long as an issue does not concern them and if they are not directly affected by the same. Such a situation happens due to a lack of awareness and also because of the belief that they feel they are dependent on service providers. In the initial stages, interaction of people and communities was low, as they were not accustomed to talking to officials directly, leave alone negotiating with them or even seeking accountability. Further, there are certain socially constructed hierarchies that imply that people from lower strata are not in a position to approach government officials.

> "I am living here since last 10 Years, My husband died while the survey was going on and my name was not included in the list. I am a widow and do housework to feed 5 kids of mine. Residents of the locality say that I will have to pay the officers to get my name attached in the beneficiary list. Please allot me a house, I will be grateful".
>
> **One of the beneficiaries of SFS, Chandigarh**

Historically, authorities have been adverse to change and it may be said that the colonial mindset of the 'ruler' is a factor that makes them resist being accountable to the people. Further, though, social audit mandates the accountability of authorities, approaching them is not always an easy task, as they are not willing to speak to others, lest any case of corruption gets exposed. Hence, they often resist social audit processes within their jurisdiction and at times they also use strong-arm tactics to discourage civil society organisations and activists from facilitating such processes. Traditionally, the poor and marginalised have had no say in matters of the government and this has resulted in then lacking the capacity and skills of communicating and negotiating with government officials and elected representatives, for securing even their basic rights.

"It is a zoo and we are now been treated as animals, who have been filled in these cage-like houses with bad construction quality and without proper amenities. We are poor. What could we do? Whom do we believe?"

2.3 Conflicting Socio-Economic Interests

Urban society, especially those living in slums, is not homogeneous and there are conflicting interests and differences of opinion based on lines of caste, class and gender. Social audit, keeping inclusion as its target, has the interests of the socially marginalized, as one of its key objectives. However the socially powerful groups resist such processes which promote a more egalitarian society and go to the extent of siding with the authorities, to maintain the status quo of social inequality. The state and civil society has an important role in ensuring the safety and security of citizens who testify at public hearings, as well as their faith in processes of democracy.

2.4 Unverifiable Records

The format of the records can sometimes be problematic in that they might not always be able to communicate vital information. This can lead to discrepancies between the unit plan that was sanctioned and what was implemented.

For example, the BSUP flats which were sanctioned in DPR were slightly bigger in size than what were constructed, and open spaces that existed in the plan had been removed in the implementation stage. Further, no boundary wall was built around the settlement, making it vulnerable and open to theft and other crimes. Such inconsistencies leave people felling discontented and cheated. To verify that discrepancies have taken place will only be possible if the formats of the records are changed, so that one can identify the inconsistency between the plan and its implementation.

> "We had been shown a different plan, but completely different houses have been given to us. They (Officials of Chandigarh Housing Board) have filled us forcefully in these bad quality flats; we didn't want to leave our shanties and come here.   --**A group of beneficiaries of SFS, Chandigarh**

2.5 Low Participation in Meetings

The real success of a Social Audit is reflected on the levels of participation among the beneficiaries. But, there have been reluctance on the part of the people to participate in the meetings that have been held for the purpose of discussing the social audit. This might have originated from the prevalent apathy owing to experiences of neglect from the authorities.

Thus, the lack of responses to prior resolutions and lack of meaningful discussions have hampered a smooth progress in the implementation of social audits. Such apathy also re-affirms the dominance of the upper class and upper caste, cementing existing power structures.

2.6 An Expensive Exercise

Substantial financial and human resources are needed for travel and logistical support for the audit committee and the ward meetings. Further, local residents, who are the primary stakeholders in this scheme, have to be paid equivalent wages, if they spend their day in the process. Such participation is critical in order to make the social audit process a people-led exercise. These factors imply that in order that outcomes of social audit are effective, sustainable and in keeping with the spirit behind such a process, will entail additional resources. Hence a certain sum, from the scheme's administrative budget, needs to be earmarked for social audit or a separate fund be created for it.

Unit 3: The Way Forward

Social Audits, which adds a new dimension to the methodology of evaluation of projects, should be an integral part of the project implementation process. The Social Audit Committees should therefore be formed at the onset of the project itself, so that they can be involved in the entire process, from beneficiary selection to the formation of residents' committees for post-project maintenance of the housing assets. It is also essential that the committees so formed, develop proper formats to carry out such audits and capture relevant information.

Social audits help assess various aspects of the project like quality of construction, design, financial aspects etc. Therefore, steps of social audit must be mandated at each stage of the project, or else procedures like assessing the quality of construction becomes obsolete if undertaken after the completion of the project. .

Social audits have potential to create people-centric quality control mechanisms. The assessment should be concerned with a qualitative improvement in the lifestyle of the people and not be considered as a mere checklist of targets that need completion. The need of the hour is the incorporation and participation of the poor and the marginalised in mainstream governance processes. Creation of an enabling environment where people's point of view is integral and to be merged with the planning and implementation process to generate quality housing and infrastructure will also optimize the expenditures incurred, both in terms of financial resources, as well as satisfaction levels of the people concerned.

Academic institutions and NGOs play a significant role in the conduct of the social audit. Since NGOs work very closely with the community and have a good rapport, they can help build the required capacities among the community and Social Audit Committees for conducting social audit. NGOs can also play the role of facilitators while organising meetings with various stakeholders for social audit.

A proper implementation plan should be made as a part of the DPR, with adequate time period allocated to various activities. However, in developing a housing scheme, it is possible that the beneficiaries of the project, while drawn from the poor and the marginalised community, will differ in their levels of income. Therefore, the plan might consider offering various housing options in a settlement, where units vary in size instead of having just one standard design. Such a plan will not only meet the varied needs of different families but also take into account their individual financial contexts. Yet, it is important to consider that housing units to be provided in the new housing system should be comparable in size with the old ones and not tend towards being smaller.

On the basis of field experiences it has been realised that extra efforts are required, along with complying with statutory provisions, to promote transparency and accountability in various public institutions.

The 'demand side' needs to be strengthened by generating awareness, building capacities, mobilisation and facilitation for entitlements.

The 'supply side', primarily responsible for follow up actions, should be supported by creating a non-threatening environment. Capacity building in documentation and record keeping is essential.

Completing the process of devolution to local governments is critical, because accountability without power is as incomplete as power without accountability.

The large-scale involvement of civil society organisations in social audit will have a great impact on the GO-NGO relationship in the future, which currently varies from conflict to collaboration. The Government of India has recognised the supportive, as well as critical role of the voluntary sector, as stated in the Government of India policy on the voluntary sector -

"The voluntary sector has contributed significantly to finding innovative solutions to poverty, deprivation, discrimination and exclusion, through means such as awareness raising, social mobilization, service delivery, training, research, and advocacy. The voluntary sector has been serving as an effective non-political link between the people and the Government. This policy recognizes the important role that the voluntary sector has to play in various areas and affirms the growing need for collaboration with the voluntary sector by the Government, as well as by the private sector, at the local, provincial and national levels" (Planning Commission, 2007).

The voluntary sector must play its role in supporting initiatives and maintain its linkages between the people and the government at all levels, in ensuring that the interests of the poor and the marginalised are secured.

SUMMARY

As a roundup to the course, this Module primarily dealt with the impact that social audits have had on the people, as well as the government. We have also looked at various examples of social audit, and through the experience of PRIA and SPA, working with the settlements in Chandigarh, for the Small Flat Scheme, a clear picture was drawn, as to the benefits and challenges in implementing social audit.

Successful social audits have to be people-led and NGOs and academic institutions play a crucial role in facilitating these movements, through educating the people and being the link between them and the government. But as long as people do not take the initiative, the social audit cannot be termed as successful or participatory.

It was observed that social audits created awareness amongst the targeted population of people of Chandigarh, thus prompting them to demand transparency. But social audits are not without drawbacks. They are expensive, time consuming, and face the additional challenge, posed due to the apathy of the people and the reluctance of government officials' in bringing about change

But participatory social audit has become a necessity. Thus people should be inculcated with a culture of governance that places them in the top of the hierarchy, regardless of their economic, caste, gender statuses

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