

Some Recent Experience in Community Voice Card: An Innovative Tool towards Assessing Service Delivery for MDGs¹

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Background

Community Voice Card (CVC) is emerging as a handy tool for peoples' assessment of delivery of services by different agencies, whether government, non-government or private agencies. Peoples' views are important as they are the main clientele and stakeholders of the development process. The scope of CVC (also termed as Community Score Card (CSC), Community Voice Tool (CVT)) for assessing MDG-related performance from peoples' perspective hold great potential in absence of appropriate tools for measuring peoples' satisfaction with the way the MDGs are progressing in the developing countries. The tool under reference has been applied to at least four countries for achieving different objectives as below. CVC was first applied as a tool for institutional assessment while undertaking a Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) study at a sub-national level in 2004-05 in West Bengal (India). Realizing the potential of the tool and the community response, it was refined within an institutional framework of good governance, which helped to evolve a set of criteria for assessing delivery of services by different institutions. In the late 2005, it was further developed as a tool for participatory monitoring system for Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and Millennium Development Goal (MDG)-related indicators in Nepal and was applied in 2006. In August - September 2006, the tool was piloted in Moldova to see its applicability in terms of monitoring MDG-related indicators under PRSPs by the civil society. In 2007, the tool has further been refined and is being applied towards long-term monitoring of institutional performance in a poverty reduction project in South China, covering 3 provinces.

The above description shows that CVC has come a long way since 2004 though still evolving through cross-country experiences. The remainder of the paper provides an account of the context, objectives, key elements of the projects, implementation strategies, costs, challenges faced and how they were overcome, lessons learnt, innovative features, replication possibilities and other dimensions of CVC.

Context

The economic, social and political situation in the four countries under reference is described below.

India (West Bengal) – India's GDP is growing at the rate of 6.2 per cent over 2000-2004 and is one of the fast growing economies in Asia. Situated in the Eastern part of India, the State of West Bengal covers an area of 88,752 Sq km with 12 agro-ecological zones and has a population of 82 million (as per 2001 census), which accounts for 7.8 per cent of country's total population. The state has a literacy rate of nearly 70 per cent and a sex ratio of 934. The State of West Bengal, a forerunner in the implementation of agrarian reforms with a 3-tier system of decentralized planning and governance has emerged as having the highest rate of growth in agricultural productivity with rapid decline in rural poverty since 1977. However, despite the

¹ Thanks are due to PRD, Government of West Bengal, Planning Commission, Nepal, UNDP-Nepal, UNDP-Moldova, Participation Council-Moldova, Mihail Peleah, Sujatha Viswanathan, Amitava Mukherjee, M.N. Roy, Dilip Ghosh, Dilip Pal, Subrata Chakravarty, Madhumita Parihari and the local communities engaged in community voice tool. Thanks are also due to Neil Fernando for his generous editing of the paper. All errors and omissions can be attributed to the author.

declining trends in rural poverty, some studies have observed that the State's initiative in promoting social opportunities in the rural areas has been "mixed". While land reforms and minimum wage-related policies have been given priority by the Marxist Government, the social development services like health and education have been "comparatively neglected" and the State's achievements in these sectors are only "modest".

Nepal – In terms of the Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP, 2004), Nepal has a rank of 138th out of 177 countries with an HDI of 0.527. Nepal's economy after the prolonged conflict is seemingly promising since 2006 with the successful conclusion of historic peoples' movement in April. Though still in a fragile situation due to the uncertainty of political coalitions and other socio-economic bottlenecks, Nepal's situation is gradually improving after more than a decade-long internal conflict, political stalemate and lack of local governance. Such on-going conflict conditions have adversely impacted Nepal's economy though Nepal's poverty has reduced from 42% in 1995-96, to 38% in 2001-02 and then to 31% in 2003-04. With 90% of its poor living in rural areas and engaged in subsistence farming, it is important to mention that poverty in Nepal is a complex combination of low human development, capability deficit, conflict-ridden economy, lack of good governance, political instability, skewed economic growth and high levels of social exclusion.

Moldova – The Republic of Moldova, a low income economy in transition has made continuous progress in terms of recording steady growth since 2000 and achieved a GDP growth of 6.8% estimated at the end of 2004. Faced with many challenges as a part of the ex-Soviet bloc, Moldova's economy prior to the year 2000 has experienced wide fluctuations in growth rate and exchange rate, high inflation, agriculture drought and other challenges of an economy in transition (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Moldova). As per Human Development Report (UNDP, 2003), the Republic of Moldova is ranked as a medium human development country with an inter-country rank of 108 and an HDI value of 0.700, which is below the world average of 0.722. Republic of Moldova has a GDP per capita in US\$ Purchasing Power Parity Index of 2150, which is more than 3 times below the world average. Though Republic of Moldova has performed satisfactorily in terms of implementation of MDG goals related to education and gender equality, more effort is required in the area of poverty reduction, child health and eradication of TB and HIV/AIDS (UNDP, 2003 and 2005). Poverty needs to be tackled more strategically since poverty is growing rapidly across all segments of the population (UNDP, 2002).

China – As shown by recent statistics, China is amongst the fastest growing countries with an average GDP growth rate of 9.4% during the period 2000-2004. With population growth of 0.57%, China has less than half that of India's population growth rate of 1.44%. Similarly, China's literacy rate of 90.9% is a major achievement as compared to say India's literacy rate of 59.5%. However, on the poverty front, though China has been able to reduce poverty much faster than many other countries to 10% of its population (below poverty line), about 50% of its labour force still remains in agriculture with substantial unemployment and underemployment in the rural areas. One main challenge faced by China on the poverty front is in terms of marginalization of ethnic minorities where census data show that there are 55 ethnic minorities scattered mostly along the Chinese borders in the south, southwest, north and northwest. The macro picture on growth and poverty in China is indeed a rosy one. However, the macro picture fails to reflect the phenomena that such growth process and poverty reduction has bypassed the marginalized and the disadvantaged groups, such as the ethnic minority groups in China.

Rationale

The following account provides the main reasons for implementing the CVC in the four countries under reference.

- (i) India (West Bengal) – In West Bengal, the tool was applied as a part of participatory

poverty assessment for eliciting peoples' perspectives on poverty situation before negotiations with government for external loan. The tool was applied to find out how people assessed decentralized governance, their quality of service delivery on the ground and the related decisions and activities; their strengths and limitations and suggestions in this regard.

(ii) Nepal – The original purpose of the study was to develop an institutional participatory poverty monitoring mechanism that influences policies; strengthens broad-based national ownership of the PRSP; and public accountability and responsiveness of the PRSP to the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged people in Nepal (National Planning Commission, 2004). The tool was applied by the Nepal Planning Commission to elicit PRSP indicators from peoples' perspectives and how changes in poverty reduction, if any could be captured, especially of those who were socially excluded.

(iii) Moldova – The tool was being piloted as a participatory monitoring exercise for PRSP for support towards the area of participation in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of public policies, the main emphasis being implementation of the Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (EGPRSP) (Government of Moldova, 2004a; 2004b; SCERS, 2005).

(iv) China – The tool is being currently applied as a part of participatory monitoring exercise for a poverty reduction project situated in South West China (covering 3 provinces – Sichuan, Guangxi and Yunnan), the objective being to establish and support an approach for monitoring poverty impacts in the project.

Project Formulation

The operational steps of project formulation will be discussed more fully as the paper progresses while this section just outlines the agencies that formulated the projects in each country.

- (i) India (West Bengal) – research study supported by the Government of West Bengal, Government of India and Asian Development Bank and undertaken by a field research agency in India by the name of Development Tracks
- (ii) Nepal – formulated and implemented by the Planning Commission of Nepal
- (iii) Moldova – planned and implemented by the Participation Council – an NGO Forum, donor and Government of Moldova
- (iv) China – formulated and implemented both by the Provincial Government top down and the bottom level government staff.

Project Goals and Objectives

- (i) India (West Bengal) – The objective was a field research study in Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) for an in-depth and issue-based assessment of poverty from the perspectives of the poor (Development Tracks: 2005)
- (ii) Nepal – One main objective was to find peoples' tools for monitoring PRSP and identify suitable indicators
- (iii) Moldova – It was to find suitable mechanisms for monitoring PRSP
- (iv) China – One main objective was to adopt participatory monitoring for poverty reduction project

Key Elements of the Project

Target Beneficiaries

- (i) India (West Bengal) - The PPA study was done *in situ*, through participatory sessions with more than 4000 village participants, of which, 55%, on average, were women. The sampling frame was also representative of socially, culturally and ecologically vulnerable groups. Selection of districts took into account the agro-ecological and social diversities and the incidence of income and human poverty as well.
- (ii) Nepal – The Community Voice Tool (CVT) was applied to the poor communities and those socially excluded in two sampled districts – one terai and one hill district were included.
- (iii) Moldova – CVC was applied with villagers in two sampled villages who had access to health and education services provided by the State.
- (iv) China – The participants were the rural ethnic communities in sampled villages/townships in three provinces – Guangxi, Sichuan and Yunnan

Geographic coverage of the project

- (i) India (West Bengal) – The PPA study was undertaken in more than 100 locations where 95% were rural areas and 5% were urban/peri-urban localities, across twelve districts of West Bengal (India) including urban locations. The districts represented twelve different agro-ecological zones in the State of West Bengal and different types of rural and urban poverty groups and areas. Selection of districts took into account the agro-ecological and social diversities and the incidence of income and human poverty as well.
- (ii) Nepal – The study covered two districts, viz. Saptari in the terai and Gorkha in the hills. The information was collected from both household survey and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs). The samples include a total of 406 households and 24 FGDs with a gender balance. In addition to scoring for the services, qualitative information is sought mainly from the FGDs.
- (iii) Moldova – The villages of Zubresti and Galesti of the Straseni rayon were selected for applying/testing the CVT from the list of villages in which the National Bureau of Statistics conducts its Household Budget Survey, one of them being relatively poor, and the other was somewhat better off. The criteria for selection of the two villages include: (i) availability of the Local Public Administration Units (LPA) to host the event and (ii) available infrastructure (school and health care centre/policlinics).
- (iv) China - Eighteen villages/townships in 3 provinces were covered – Sichuan, Yunnan and Gauangx which had 6 villages/townships each. The villages were selected based on different criteria such as remoteness of the village; those in which project-related activities were performed; those with large ethnic minorities etc. The target groups were the ethnic minorities for whom the poverty reduction project was meant.

Project activities

Key Components

- (a) Decision to explore CVC and Need Assessment and setting of objectives
- (b) Preparation for Workshop and field exercises
- (c) Organizing Facilitators' Workshop
- (d) Conducting Field Exercises
- (e) Sharing of findings
- (f) Data collation, processing and report writing
- (g) Presentation of findings to policy makers and other stakeholders

(h) Publication of report, sharing of report and advocacy.

Key technical inputs

In a framework of good governance/effective institutions, CVT is developed based on a list of criteria for assessing attributes such as 'responsiveness', 'accountability', 'quality', 'cost', 'infrastructure', 'access' and other relevant criteria. These criteria may be clustered depending on the objectives and local conditions and the services to be evaluated.

Criteria for Community Voice Tool (CVT)

- (i) **Awareness** – The degree of information which local Communities have about the availability of relevant services in the community, Communities' understanding of the importance of services; ways of using the available benefits etc.
- (ii) **Access and Inclusion/Large involvement** – The criterion relates to the extent to which the services under assessment are accessible in time and space; whether every local Community member is provided with equal opportunities to benefit from services.
- (iii) **Attitude and Behaviour** – The way service providers behave with local Community members; whether all the Communities are treated equally without discrimination based on race, social status, caste, creed, race, religion etc.
- (iv) **Quality, Timeliness and Efficiency** – The criterion relates to quality of services; how timely they are; whether they are provided within a reasonable time; whether they have a positive impact on the Communities; whether they are useful; and what is the state of professionalism of service providers.
- (v) **Infrastructure** – This criterion relates to the status of infrastructure; quality of infrastructure; whether it is sufficient.
- (vi) **Responsiveness** – This criterion is associated with the extent in which the service providers respond to Communities' need and problems.
- (vii) **Cost (including hidden cost)** – The amount of cost involved in procuring such services; how affordable are they; how much one has to spend; whether one has to pay a bribe or not
- (viii) **Sustainability** – Whether the service under assessment will be available in the community after a certain period of time; with regularity and how do the local communities perceive the future of such services; and how predictable is the service under reference.
- (ix) **Suggestions for Improvement** – The local communities make suggestions to make the service much more efficient, sustainable and beneficial.

Technical Parts of CVT – While discussing technical aspects of CVT, it may be pointed out that CVC is different from that of a Citizen Report Card (CSR), which is mainly prepared through a structured questionnaire (for details, see Adikeshavalu, 2004; Buhl, et. al, 2004a; Buhl et. al, 2004b; The World Bank, 2001; The World Bank, 2004). CVT is a voice tool based on participatory group interactions rather than on any structured questionnaire.

The whole process of application of the CVT may be divided into 4 parts:

(a) PART 1 consists of small group discussions (8-10 persons) on the basis of interview guidelines. Two or more services may be evaluated within the same group. Facilitators encourage participants to evaluate the service(s) according to predefined criteria though scope for peoples' criteria is kept open in many exercises. Participants are requested to arrive at a common score as a group, which is preferably reached by the method of consensus. This then becomes the group score. If such a consensus cannot be reached, the facilitator notes the individual scores by participants. Finally, the group is requested to make suggestions and recommendations for the improvement of the services under discussion and their delivery.

(b) PART 2 - Semi-structured interviews are also conducted with persons working within such services or opinion leaders, mostly in order to avoid influence of dominant participants during the process of small group discussions. Interviews are conducted on the basis of a semi-structured questionnaire where most questions are open. The semi-structured questionnaire also helps to: a) validate and verify by comparison, b) engage opinion leaders and others, and ensures a higher quality of discussion and is useful for analysis and filling gaps.

(c) In PART 3, field facilitators present the results of group discussions to service providers or local public authorities. This may happen shortly after the FGDs and interviews, or on a different day jointly agreed in advance. The community assessments of services provided are disseminated during meeting-discussions with the service providers based on the criteria for assessment. In such sessions, suggestions and recommendations for improvement are also flagged.

(d) PART 4 is analysis of data and preparation of reports and CVCs for further dissemination. Since there is generally a number of villages and towns to be covered, there needs to be some time for organizing, collating data, processing it and writing the report and presenting it to different groups of stakeholders.

Depending on the size of the sample, the capacity building workshop takes 5-7 days including preparation and the field exercise per village/town would take not more than 2 days. This is followed by report writing on the CVT exercise, which could take 2 days to 15 days depending on the scale and size of application.

Timeframe

India – 2004 -05
Nepal – 2005-06
Moldova – 2006
China - 2007 to 2011

Impact or outcomes

Some traces of impacts are indicated below though it is somewhat early to have substantive impacts.

- (i) India (West Bengal) – Key methodology, results and lessons learnt were fed into a larger project for decentralization at District/Ward level, which is still running.
- (ii) Nepal – Study completed – too early for impact, if any – but field evidence shows that the tool is well tested and applicable. It has increased awareness of the community participants and has also empowered them, especially the poor to assess their own services and provide their assessment and feedback for onward transmission to official channels.
- (iii) Moldova – Yet to be scaled up for showing macro-level results. The participants from local communities enjoyed doing the assessments and the service delivery officials were ready to listen to the views of the participants. Officials were interested in listening to gaps their services had, the suggestions of the participants for improving education and health services. The officials also suggested actions on the spot to improve the quality of services. The local participants felt honoured to get an opportunity to provide their assessment and give their frank views and mark their service providers based on performance.
- (iv) China – Study is on-going and to be continued until 2011. The group assessment shows that the local ethnic communities can easily distinguish between the criteria and

provide their frank assessment and group score to assess performance of their service providers.

Total Project cost

i) India (West Bengal) – Technical training inputs – INR 677,018 (approx. US\$ 15000/-) (Workshop and Field Application for 100 villages in 10 districts) plus (Local travel costs of around INR 200,000 (approx. US \$5000/-). Total: US\$ 20,000/- for 100 villages in 10 districts.

ii) Nepal – Not available except external expert's cost

iii) Moldova –Not Available except trainer-facilitators' cost

iv) China – On-going

The role of the Government (National/Local)

- (i) India (West Bengal) – Contributed towards local travel and follow up workshops
- (ii) Nepal – Linked with local service providers and district officials
- (iii) Moldova – Linked with local service providers and helped in meetings -discussions
- (iv) China – contributing towards local travel and required workshops

Costs on account of Private/Community/Corporate

- (i) India (West Bengal) – None, except time as a resource given voluntarily by local communities under study
- (ii) Nepal – None, except time as a resource given voluntarily by local communities under study
- (iii) Moldova – None, except time as a resource given voluntarily by local communities under study
- (iv) China - None, except time as a resource given voluntarily by local communities under study

External assistance by source

- (i) India (West Bengal) – Asian Development Bank and DFID, UK
- (ii) Nepal – UNDP, Nepal
- (iii) Moldova – UNDP, Moldova
- (iv) China – World Bank and DFID, UK

Project Management

Implementing Agency

- (i) India (West Bengal) – State Government of West Bengal and Indian Field/Action Research Firm
- (ii) Nepal – Planning Commission of Nepal and national level NGOs
- (iii) Moldova – Government of Moldova and Participation Council (national NGO Federation)
- (iv) China – Government of China, Provincial Governments and ITAD, UK

Coordinating mechanisms

- (i) India (West Bengal) – National level, District level and block/village level machinery
- (ii) Nepal – National level, District level and village level machinery
- (iii) Moldova – Province, county and village level machinery
- (iv) China – Province, county and township/village level machinery

Monitoring and evaluation of project activities

- (i) India (West Bengal) – by the state-level government and the donors
- (ii) Nepal – by the government and UNDP, Nepal
- (iii) Moldova – by NGO Participation Council, by the government and UNDP, Moldova
- (iv) China – by the government and ITAD, UK

Challenges and how they were overcome

(a) One common challenge faced with regard to participatory tools in general is that economists, hard core classical academicians and technical experts lacked flexibility in listening to the voices of the poor and also in appreciating qualitative data through such voices and in handling and interpreting such data. Lack of flexibility of project leaders' and staff with regard to participatory tools and listening to the voices of the poor were overcome to a considerable extent by means of running training workshops and experiential field learning sessions.

(b) It was difficult to find enough good facilitators to conduct small group discussions for application of the tool. There was dearth of good facilitators in many agencies and sometimes inexperienced facilitators were unable to handle tricky situations which arose during participating with communities and took more time than others in conducting sessions. One way adopted by field coordinators was to observe the field sessions and to identify such problems which inexperienced facilitators faced and sort them out on-the-spot. The other way was to team up an inexperienced Field Facilitator with an experienced one for conducting small group discussions.

(c) Another challenge faced was that not all government bodies were prepared to hear the problems listed by common people and listen to suggested changes. Some of the service delivery agencies and the top officials were willing to listen to peoples' assessment and undertake appropriate actions while others were somewhat reluctant and escapist. It was realized that the best way was to start with the strengths of the agency as described by people before going into their weaknesses.

(d) There is rising community expectations from their service providers. - This is a general phenomenon wherein consumers have become better informed and expect better quality of services from their service providers. The service providers often have many constraints and lack of technical expertise, funds and managerial skills to provide good quality services. The high expectations of the consumers also influence their assessment of service delivery. Ways to overcome this is to ask the public about whether they are also aware of the constraints faced by the service providers and to inquire about the possible contributions by the public towards bettering delivery of services.

(e) The service providers at the local level are not the decision makers - This posed as a problem during the presentation of summary of public assessments to the service providers. It was decided that senior officials and decision makers are also invited to such sessions so as to make such sessions more effective and utilize them better. It was also to make the senior officials/decision makers aware of public views and assessment and to make them respond to such public assessment whether instantaneously or over a period of time.

(f) There were challenges in setting criteria for peoples' assessment of service providers. This issue was sorted out by keeping the list of criteria flexible so as to be able to add new criteria as required. Such new criteria could come from the people while interacting with them or from the facilitators or jointly.

Lessons learned

- (a) It is important to have country experience and case studies ready for sharing and circulation for the decision-making and implementing agencies and also for the researchers and field facilitators. Such country experience and case studies help them to appreciate the whole gamut of the tool and also help them to visualize the processes involved and the output/s which could be derived from the application of the tool.
- (b) It is desirable to have data processors ready at CVT workshops and after field visits, preferably with SPSS package. This helps to organize, collate and quickly process the data and also helps to cross-check data and to identify gaps, if any.
- (c) It is prudent for the field team to have discussion on ways to manage peoples' expectations. Application of the tool makes many people think that their service delivery would improve once they have made an assessment. However, it is important to explain to the people that this is an exercise in peoples' assessment of service delivery, which would then be transmitted to the service delivery agencies and the outcome would be decided by the latter. It may or may not result in improvement/s as desired.
- (d) It is of utmost importance to demonstrate significance of the tools to policy makers and service delivery organizations so that they do not feel threatened. It is important to explain to them the value of peoples' assessment of service delivery so that suitable improvements could be brought about. The whole exercise needs to be done in a positive mode.
- (e) Select and prepare a good team of facilitators through a workshop. This is perhaps the most important part of the whole story because a skillful set of facilitators could make the most of the opportunity in interacting with people, applying the tool in a positive mode and managing peoples' expectations without falling out and diffusing delicate and explosive situations.
- (f) The team of facilitators should be ready to share immediate outcome and also verify and cross-check field data. For any field application, the team of facilitators should be ready to summarize and present their field findings to different clientele groups as required and also to service delivery agencies and other officials and leaders as required.

Success factors:

- (i) The CVT is easy to use and can be adapted to different situations as required. This is brought out by local experience gained in the four countries.
- (ii) The tool is flexible in application and any type of service delivery can be assessed by means of this tool.
- (iii) It is adaptable in different countries irrespective of its level of development.
- (iv) And with detailed guidelines, facilitators can apply it with ease. People as participants in usage of the tool are able to understand its objective/s and application.
- (v) The usage of tool is gaining multi-country experience as indicated above.

Role of Champions

It is essential to recommend and support peoples' voice tool to policy makers and policy advisers, otherwise they may not appreciate the power of such a tool. Hence, the role of champions is important. Champions were different in different countries. For India (West Bengal), it was the field research firm working with the state government. The latter was

looking for autonomous methodology for community participation, though this was not easy to provide. It was participatory poverty assessment carried out by the research firm that helped to further the tool. In case of Nepal and Moldova, UNDP Nepal and UNDP Moldova were the champions respectively, which supported explorations in application of the tool in practice. In China, it was ITAD consultant, who prepared the methodology and suggested ways to apply and adapt it.

Support

In case of CVT, multi-stakeholder support is required since there are different stages of application of the tool. Different levels of stakeholders help in fruitful application of the tool. Since CVT involves not only public assessment but also sharing of information with service delivery agencies, senior officials responsible for decision making and implicit advocacy to influence decision making based on public perceptions. Hence, for CVT multi-stakeholder support is to be solicited from local communities as consumers of services, local community leaders, service agencies, leaders, decision makers, government and donors are important.

Motivation

It is important to motivate both government and local communities for effective application of CVT. If the community feels that nothing much can be changed in delivery of services even with their honest assessment, then the use of CVT is constrained to that extent. And, similarly, the local service delivery agencies may feel that they face too many constraints to do justice to peoples' perceptions about their services. In both the cases, the team of facilitators needs to look for illustrative opportunities to show how important can public assessment be and how small changes in the service delivery chain can improve quality of life of local communities.

Other Innovations

There could be different innovations and adaptations of the tool depending on the country concerned. For instance, new criteria could be added to the CVT framework as required. Questionnaires can be made more interactive and customized.

Justification for the good practice

Why CVT is viewed as a good practice?

- It is a tool to reach 'voices', especially of the poor to the service provider. It helps flag areas of concern and related issues in service delivery for future action. It helps empower public to provide their opinion.
- It also helps to discern the role of local communities and establish a channel of communication between them and the local service providers. It helps to get connected with people to get public feedback and ideas of different aspects of service delivery.
- It is a handy tool towards improving quality of MDG-related services based on peoples' feedback. It also helps local communities to be involved in assessing delivery of local services and also suggests ways for improvement of services and engaging local communities.
- At the policy and practice levels, it helps to make sense of what works and what doesn't – the strengths and weaknesses of service delivery.
- It creates space for assessing accountability of the service provider.

- It can be used as a strategic tool for the service provider who care to provide quality services to local communities and are looking for opportunities to improve their performance.
- Regular use of the tool helps establish regular communication with people and creates a channel from the 'down' (people) to the 'top' (service provider) for peoples' assessment. This, in essence, then becomes a tool for participatory monitoring of public services. It could then constitute a part of participatory poverty monitoring where poor people are involved in assessing public services through CVT on a regular basis.

Potential for replication

Years back in 1997-99, CVT was first explored as a Communication Linkage Matrix tool in Vietnam in two provinces - Ha Giang and Quang Binh, as part of training under Agriculture Resource Conservation Project/s supported by UNDP/UNOPS/IFAD and the Government of Vietnam. It was noticed that the villagers were eager to assess delivery of services by the local service providers and also assess factors responsible to good/bad quality of services and suggest ways to overcome/tackle them.

CVT was later applied as a part of Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) in West Bengal (India) in 2004-05 in 100 villages through participatory sessions with poor women and men though with a limited set of criteria. The focus was more on the PPA than on CVT and outputs from application of CVT though distinct were merged with PPA as perspectives of the poor. Though the tool was applied there was no community score card prepared since that was not the prime objective. However, the application of CVT helped to provide a reasonable assessment by people on local governance and service delivery and that including PPA contributed in some measure towards steps taken by the State Government to implement a project on decentralized planning where people are being involved from the very start to actively participate in their local planning process with the help of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools.

Later when the Government of Nepal was in need of a participatory monitoring tool for monitoring MDGs, the CVT tool was offered as a robust tool. Later it was applied to two districts with socially excluded communities of Nepal by at least two research organizations. In Nepal, the CVT was applied to monitor government services in 10 topical areas including schools, health, agriculture, livestock, drinking water, electricity, vital registration, land revenue collection etc. The sample size covered was a total of 406 households with 24 Focus Group Discussions together with a gender balance. Amongst many results, one important finding is that there is considerable variation in the size of service users of different services.

In Moldova, a tool was required for participatory monitoring of Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (EGPRSP) for which the CVT was piloted in two villages where the use of questionnaire was mainly undertaken to validate outcomes from participatory interactions with different groups of clients of services in two villages.

All criteria for CVT were applied to 2 MDG related topics – 'education' and 'health' and the results were shared with different stakeholders including local governors. The criteria and the outcomes were assessed by a group of experts, facilitators and guidelines for participatory group discussions. Also semi-structured questionnaires were finalized on that basis for application to larger areas for purposes of monitoring.

In China, the CVT is being applied to 3 provinces for purposes of monitoring a large project on poverty reduction. A total of 18 representative villages with samples of 6 villages, each, in the 3 provinces constitute the size of application of CVT. Monitoring work is on-going and the results are yet to be collated. Experience from China shows that the CVT is amply applicable and can

produce a neat picture of peoples' assessment of service delivery at the local level. The data collated from different sample villages would provide a higher level picture of service delivery in the provinces engaged in project implementation. Such picture is still under construction and the work is on-going.

Conclusion

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), though well entrenched into the global development agenda, are still to be made immensely practicable and feasible at the local level. Whatever be the global agenda, the crux of the matter is that it is at the local level that the litmus test of achieving the first seven MDG goals lies with the primary stakeholders who have to be really empowered to own these goals, assess them and feel satisfied with their progress. It is in the context of the primary stakeholders at the local level that much remains to be done and there exists a major vacuum. The Community Voice Tool (CVT) is an empowering tool for local communities to assess their service delivery agencies and the pace of progress in basic services. It is a handy and flexible tool and has been applied and adapted in four countries - India, Nepal, Moldova and China. It is a powerful tool to assess the delivery performance of service delivery agencies and enables communities as consumers of services to articulate their voices in assessing local service providers. Field experience shows that the tool has wide applicability whether in terms of countries, regions and localities. The tool is easily applicable to a range of services, whether MDG-related or others. Based on framework and criteria for good governance, the tool is equally applicable to government, non-government and private service delivery agencies. Experiential lessons in CVT are still emerging and explorations to make it a strategic tool continues.

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