

## The Nuts and Bolts of Citizens' Surveys

—Vivek Misra

The most powerful weapon on earth is public opinion - never forget that.

**Paul Crouser**

### 1 Introduction

In old times and new, 'Governance' has been the subject of much interest and debate. Be it the 'Arthashastra', the model Greek city-states, Marx's socialistic doctrine, the neo-liberal ideology or the recent Good Governance agenda – attempts have been made, time and again, to define and redefine relations between the ruler and the ruled. However, unlike earlier attempts, the latest one comes at a time when an information revolution is sweeping across the world. This holds the potential of fundamentally changing the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, or rather, the government and the citizens.

With increasing access to information and the democratisation of knowledge, the role of citizens in the process of governance is undergoing a paradigm shift. From being mere recipients of a one-way dialogue (or should we say monologue), citizens now increasingly demand to be consulted and participate in the decision-making process, rather than just serve as the 'sleeping mass' in a representative democracy. In light of the changing aspirations of the citizens, it is incumbent on the State to provide ways and means to enhance the role of citizens in the decision-making process and facilitate better State-Society articulation.

Citizens' Surveys serve as an important tool by which the State/Government can engage citizens in the process of governance. Not only do citizens' surveys provide inputs that aid and enable the government to frame policies, evaluate programmes, assess and improve service delivery, map attitudes and preferences, study voting intentions and examine demographic/socio-economic profiles but also by definition, surveys constitute a two-way communication process that enhances the nature and quality of articulation between the government and the citizens. In other words, citizen surveys are 'a good in itself and of itself'.

While customer surveys have found an important place in the management world, top-down prescriptions have historically rendered their application to the public sector a rare phenomenon. This has been typically true of countries which have lacked a vibrant civil society. However, in recent times, the downward pressures unleashed by the twin forces of democratisation and information revolution in a fractious and competitive national/international political order have necessitated the need for the Government to use citizens' surveys in order to engage with citizens.

The growing dependence on surveys and the relative lack of knowledge on survey methodology has led to a significant demand for information on the subject. The main purpose of this paper is to supply this information in simple, non-technical language for use by Government Departments. An equally important purpose of this paper is to identify problems that may arise during development of a survey and to provide techniques and guidance for solving these problems.

The paper has four subsequent sections. The second section attempts to contextualise the role of citizens in the governance process and highlights how citizens' surveys are important within this context. The third section gives a brief description of research approaches. Given the fact that surveys fall within the broader ambit of social sciences research, it is imperative that a rudimentary understanding of basic research approaches to information gathering precede the understanding of survey research.

The fourth section is the main component of the paper. It is broadly divided into six subsections. The first subsection provides an introduction to survey research viz. the basic definitions, types of surveys and key steps involved in surveying. The second subsection details the first four steps involved in survey design namely, defining the purpose of the survey, developing hypothesis, defining the population/target segment and developing the survey plan. In the third subsection, the paper attempts to elaborate on sampling techniques and methodology. The next subsection looks at the survey instrument and suggests ways in which the effective questionnaires can be developed. The fifth subsection describes the final steps in surveying namely, data gathering, data reduction and data analysis.

The fifth and final section of the paper provides a hypothetical case study that traces every stage in the survey process and presents a list of dos and don'ts that government departments/agencies should keep in mind while undertaking a survey exercise.

Surveys involve varied and complex procedures. This paper only highlights the major information, techniques, and procedures. It has been so constructed that only a rudimentary knowledge of statistics is required. More detailed treatments of these subjects can be made available on request. Although many of the techniques and procedures covered here apply equally well to different types of survey, the primary focus is on surveys through personal face-to-face interviews which are the most common form of surveys in India. Finally, this paper should not be perceived as a do-it-yourself kit on surveys. It provides relevant information for departments to understand the basics of survey methodology. For conducting robust and accurate citizens' surveys, it is advised that they employ the services of well known research agencies that have the skill and capacity to undertake such assignments.

## 2 Good Governance, the Role of Citizens and Citizens' Surveys

Governance can be defined as 'the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development'. The nature of governance is reflected in two dynamic processes (a) the process of decision making and (b) the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented). Good governance is the effective implementation of policy and provision of services that are responsive to citizen needs.

Good governance has 8 major characteristics. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimised, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society.



**Characteristics of Good Governance**

**Citizen engagement is a core element of good governance**

Government programmes and policies must be in a constant state of evolution in order to meet the public's changing needs and expectations. When a government allows its institutions to ossify, it is no longer serving the public good. Strengthening relations with citizens enables government to do just that. It allows government to tap new sources of policy-relevant ideas, information and resources when making decisions. Equally important, it contributes to building public trust in government, raising the quality of democracy and strengthening civic capacity.

To engage people effectively in policymaking, governments must invest adequate time and resources in building robust legal, policy and institutional frameworks. They must develop and use appropriate tools, ranging from traditional opinion polls and surveys of the population at large to consensus conferences with small groups of laypersons.

Citizens' Surveys assume importance in this context. Unlike in the private sector where the market mechanism and continuous customer surveys provide feedback to private sector managers, in the public sector feedback from the public comes from interest groups and squeaky wheels. Feedback from the bulk of the public or the silent majority comes only at election time and provides little guidance towards making service delivery more effective and efficient. Surveys can be used to close this feedback gap and to gauge the effectiveness of their operations, identify unmet public needs and improve service delivery.

Citizens' Surveys can enable governments in:

- Better allocation of resources: As fiscal pressures on governments have increased, setting priorities and allocating resources where they are most needed has become increasingly important. Commonly used approaches to balancing budgets may seem equitable, but in practice can shortchange citizens. Citizens may value some services more than others and they may be more satisfied with some than with others. When government managers compare the importance of various government services to the level of service satisfaction, they can create a powerful tool for making resource allocation

decisions. They can use such information as a basis for reallocating resources from services that citizens rank low in importance to those they rank higher.

- **Optimising service levels:** In addition to supporting resource allocation decisions and focusing management attention on unsatisfactory services, citizen surveys can be used to assess the levels of service governments should provide. By making such investments, a government can ensure that it is not over- or under-providing the service and can more closely match level of service to citizen demands. Although surveys cannot be used to determine the precise level of response that should be provided, they can provide valuable information on overall service expectations.
- **Performance Evaluation:** Evaluating the performance of public-sector organisations is much more difficult. No single financial indicator can be used to distinguish high-performing governments from low performing governments. When evaluating performance, public sector managers tend to focus on the volume of resources used and activities performed. Incorporating the results of a citizen survey into the performance evaluation process can present a broader, more accurate view of government services delivery.
- **Framing better policies and programmes:** The government could also obtain inputs through citizens' surveys that could enable it to make better policy and programmes. Important policy decisions that have large public ramifications may require public support. Equally important are inputs obtained from citizens' surveys which provide information on the impact of policy reforms on the public. Survey could also provide information on effectiveness of government programmes and schemes targeted at particular sections of the population.
- **Setting user fee levels:** Citizens' surveys can also determine the level at which general fund resources should subsidise services from which many residents benefit. For some services, appropriate subsidy levels may be determined simply by counting the number of citizens who receive the service and dividing by the total population. For many services, however, this method may understate the overall demand. Many residents may want certain services provided even though they themselves do not directly benefit from them. Citizen surveys can be extremely useful in determining the overall level of demand for such services and the extent to which they should be supported by general fund revenues.

There are many other uses of surveys. They could be used to examine demographic and socio-economic profiles of different target segments. They could also enable an assessment of attitudes and behaviour of voters. Surveys could also take the form of opinion polls and assess the opinion of citizens on issues of public interest.

Citizens' surveys, if effectively used, can be an important tool for citizen engagement in the process of engagement. The following sections in the paper attempt to provide a basic understanding of the nuts and bolts of a citizens' survey that government departments may find useful in their quest for greater civic engagement in governance.

### 3 Research Approaches to Information Gathering

It is necessary, at the outset, to provide a brief idea about research approaches. This will facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of the subject of enquiry namely, Survey Research. There are two major types of research approaches: Qualitative Research and Quantitative Research.

*Qualitative research* is concerned with the opinions, experiences and feelings of individuals producing subjective data. It describes social phenomena as they occur naturally. There are four major types of qualitative research design:

- Phenomenology or study of a phenomena and describes something that exists as part of the world in which we live
- Ethnography is a methodology for descriptive studies of cultures and peoples
- Grounded theory leads to development of new theory through the collection and analysis of data about a phenomenon
- Case study research is used to describe an entity that forms a single unit such as a person, an organisation or an institution

*Quantitative research* depends on the ability to identify a set of variables. Data are used to develop concepts and theories that help us to understand the social world. Quantitative research is deductive in that it tests theories which have already been proposed. Quantitative research can be broadly classified into:

- Descriptive or Survey research which involves studying the preferences, attitudes, practices, concerns, or interests of some group of people
- Correlational research that attempts to determine whether, and to what degree, a relationship exists between two or more variables
- Causal-Comparative research seeks to discover a cause-effect relationship between two or more different programmes, methods, or groups
- Experimental research in a form of correlational research that resembles an experiment

The table below compares the two approaches - Qualitative and Quantitative - on key dimensions.

#### Qualitative Versus Quantitative Research

Comparison Dimension	Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
Type of research	Exploratory	Descriptive or causal
Purpose	Generate hypotheses	Test hypotheses
Types of questions	Probing	Non-probing
Sample size	Small	Large
Information per Respondent	Much	Varies
Administration	Requires interviewer with special skills	Fewer special skills required
Type of analysis	Subjective, Interpretive	Statistical, summarisation

Hardware	Tape recorders, projection devices, videos, pictures, discussion guides	Questionnaires, computers, printouts
Training of the researcher	Psychology, sociology, social psychology, consumer behavior, marketing research	Statistics, decision models, decision support systems, computer programming, marketing, marketing research
Ability to replicate	Low	High

## 4 Survey Research

### 4.1 Introduction

#### **What is a Survey**

Webster defines a survey as “the action of ascertaining facts regarding conditions or the condition of something to provide exact information especially to persons responsible or interested” and as “a systematic collection and analysis of data on some aspect of an area or group.” A survey, then, is a process and goes much beyond than the mere compiling of data. To yield relevant information, the data must be analysed, interpreted and evaluated.

#### **Types of Surveys**

Surveys can be divided into two general categories on the basis of their extensiveness. A complete survey is called a “census.” It involves contacting the entire group you are interested in -- the total population or universe. The other category is more common; it is a sample survey. A sample is a representative part of a whole group (universe). Thus a sample survey involves examining only a portion of the total group in which one is interested, and from it, inferring information about the group as a whole.

By sampling only a small portion of a large population, it is possible to collect data in far less time than would be required to survey the entire group. The smaller amount of data gathered by sampling as opposed to surveying an entire population can mean large cost savings. Finally, a carefully selected sample may yield more accurate information than a less careful collection of data from the entire population. On the other hand, there are certain disadvantages of sampling. The main disadvantages stem from risk, lack of representativeness of the sample, and insufficient sample size, each of which can cause errors. Inattention to any of these potential flaws will invalidate the survey results.

Surveys can be classified by their method of data collection. Mail, telephone interview, and in-person interview surveys are the most common.

- *Mail surveys* can be relatively low in cost. The main problems, however, with this type of survey are (a) the non-response errors associated with it and (b) lack of control on the representativeness of the sample that responds.
- *Telephone interviews* are an efficient method of collecting some types of data. They are particularly suited in situations where timeliness is a factor and the length of the survey is limited. However, the sampling frame in this kind of



























































