

# CITIZEN FEEDBACK IN AN URBAN SYSTEM

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PP8, September 1978  
Full Text available for Free Download

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“Any dynamic system, to be stable, needs feedback”. Applying this cybernetic statement to an urban-system means that the Authority concerned with the state of affairs in a city should be aware of the residents’ perceptions of their environment, including their reactions to the results of the decisions made and actions taken by the city authorities which produce an impact on the citizens’ lives. This ‘feedback’ information should be used to modify future decisions suitably.

## 1. NEED FOR A FEEDBACK SYSTEM

The **Urban Development Authorities** spend a lot of money on providing amenities to citizens. Such an expenditure is meaningful only if the citizens perceive the benefits of the facilities provided, and know how to utilise them. As the UDA gets the feedback information that a particular facility set up by it is being put to ‘use’ it can conclude that the decision to set up facility was correct and can think in terms of expanding it or providing complementary services. (There is otherwise the danger of a “Marie Antoinette syndrome” in the expenditure priorities.)

Once a facility has been adopted by the citizens, periodic feedback on its functioning gives confidence and assurance to those at the helm. Feedback indicating malfunctioning (or indicating a change in client needs) can lead to timely rectification measures and therefore to efficient use of public funds. It is also useful to know what uses the citizens think are proper for a facility. For example, a park built up with the objective that the old people and children will use it might be seen to be used, in fact, for playing football. This leads to two alternatives for the UDA - either it can put up goal posts, etc. and make it a proper football ground or put up trees and benches to confine it to old people and children. (In either case, we can build another park for the other use.) The point of this example, of course, is that the UDA has had the alternatives effectively raised so that a reasonable choice can be made.

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This brings us to the question of “felt needs”. There are certain things to be provided which are quite obvious to the UDA. But it is quite possible that there are things which the citizens feel a need for, and of which the UDA is not aware. In this situation the existence of a proper feedback system would provide a channel for the citizens to make their needs known to the UDA which can then take a decision within its plan and financial constraints.

## 2. **KINDS OF FEEDBACK**

Feedback from the citizens can be classified into two categories.

One is ‘**Service Feedback**’ relating to the availability and functioning of city services. These can be a request for information, the lodging of a complaint, or the seeking of a service. Its involvement with city authorities is of a short-term nature.

The other kind is ‘**Involvement Feedback**’ which can be an expressed opinion, a suggestion, or an offer to volunteer. This kind of feedback unlike service feedback has long term, policy level implications. This distinction must be made so that the feedback channels which are built up are appropriate to the type of feedback. Both kinds are needed.

## 3. **URBAN SERVICES AND NATURE OF FEEDBACK**

There are three kinds of activities going on in an urban system.

Provision for Public Utilities: First is the routine work of providing the necessities of city life which involves - power supply, water supply, sewerage/garbage disposal, drainage, transport/roads, public health, communications (telephones, newspapers, etc.) and cultural activities (like parks, libraries, museums, exhibitions, festivals, etc.)

The routine operation of city services should generate service feedback. Citizens know what services are available and what action to expect, and they demand them or complain about their malfunctioning. The feedback is generally addressed to a particular department and is expected to trigger action in a short time. At present it is quite apparent that these systems are not working, in general, to the satisfaction of citizens ... but we often lack the precise information to decide what the priorities should be in making improvements. This lack of a priority scheme results in, or elicits, the usual bureaucratic response about ‘lack of funds’. There would be plenty of funds if we had to spend them only on one object at a time.

Newly Initiated projects and Feed Forward: The second kind of activity which any UDA might take up is ‘one-shot’ or newly initiated projects. This category of activities might include - building a rail over-bridge, putting up a new market centre, installing a new traffic signaling system, the decision to make certain areas exclusive to pedestrians, charting routes for new roads, deciding the location of a proposed college/school/hospital, etc.

In a democratic set up, the process before undertaking these kinds of projects means communicating to the citizens what is proposed to be done. ‘Feed forward’ is very essential.

It has two effects. Firstly, it helps create a felt need in the citizens. It is quite possible that the feasibility and short and long term usefulness of a proposed project might not have occurred to the people but when they are informed that such and such thing is going to be done, they realise that it will be a good thing to have. This induced thinking can help ensure citizen commitment, cooperation, and eventually protection of the facility.

The second effect of feed forward is that it provides the citizens with information

regarding what is going to happen and gives them an opportunity to react, and therefore to participate in the decision.

This involvement feedback can result not only in a better match between the proposed amenity and civic needs, but also perhaps in physical contributions from citizens and voluntary agencies in property, equipment and time. Too often the government agencies assume they know all; they resent and resist voluntary agencies and set up a self-fulfilling prophecy that non-official groups are obstructive. Actually in such a complex community as a city, it is only through understanding the information transmission and morale-building functions of voluntary agencies that we can keep the system in a stable condition.

We can also think of a situation where the causal relationship would be reversed. Instead of the sequence being 'project>feed forward>involvement feedback>finalisation', it can be 'involvement feedback>decision>project'.

The citizen(s) on his own initiative, can send in a good suggestion, which after evaluation leads to the decision to undertake a project.

Planning against Emergencies: The third kind of situation in an urban system can be Emergencies - riots, fire, earthquake ... Situations which can lead to calamity if not tackled instantaneously can also be classified under this category, e.g. dangerous crack in a bridge wall or building, missing railings, dangerous potholes, manhole without a cover.

The feedback and action needed here is of a different kind. Everything has to be done in 'real time'. The changes in the situation have to be fed back to the decision making body, minute to minute, and it has to decide and act instantaneously. Generally, once the situation is known, the authorities can find out the details on the spot, but prompt information from citizens can help prevent the situation from getting too serious before authority is alerted. Even after the authorities are on the spot the citizen can be a complement to them - in action as well as in transmitting information.

After the event, eyewitness feedback from citizens can help determine causes and chalk out preventive measures for the future. These uses of citizen participation - organised or individual - are vital in countries like India where social, religious and language misunderstanding are so frequent.

#### 4. **ORGANISING TO RECEIVE FEEDBACK**

This means that the bureaucracy has to structure itself in such a way as to facilitate action on feedback. If the citizens keep on sending feedback and no timely action is taken, then by and by it will come to be recognised as a fruitless activity - and a chasm develops between the people and their administration.

Bottlenecks: Past experience demonstrates that departmental feedback channels as in operation now are not very effective for understandable reasons. The reason is human nature - which the behavioural sciences now take very seriously. It is very difficult to view one's own activities objectively. There is always a tendency to defend one's actions. If you go and tell a particular department that they are not functioning properly they will at best recount the enormous odds they are working against; more often they become hostile to you.

The second hurdle is multifaceted for it lies in the processes built into the system we have to use. Bureaucracy by definition is ponderous and rigid in its methods; this does have its advantages too, but it invariably leads to delays in decision and action. The 'concerned sections' must first be identified, then files are taken down from the dusty shelves and

passed up and down the hierarchical ladder with an ever growing number of notings and “may see”s, and finally a form letter “regretting” is sent to the complainant. This defeats the very purpose of feedback, though in bureaucratic terms, a “complaint” has been ‘disposed off’. It is only by understanding the purpose of citizen feedback in the urban system, and having a realistic idea about bureaucracy and its patterns of working that we can plan how to effectively obtain active citizen involvement and positive citizen participation. The recent government circular on ‘complaint books’ in public offices is a good occasion to review the system of feedback.

The solutions to both these problems are the same - to demonstrate that “it works” - that a feedback system not only achieves a more satisfied citizenry but also gives more satisfaction in their work to the civic operations staff and bureaucrats. Unless both these parties are more pleased, there is little chance for a single innovative notion to survive.

Need for Flexibility and Open-mindedness: As a matter of fact, once we accept in principle the idea that citizen-feedback (leading to greater administrative awareness) is a good thing, we open ourselves to a fresh look at city management and organisation design on cybernetic principles. Taken together, they can provide us with a scheme for a city management system which is more ‘flexible’ - yet more stable; quick to respond to emergencies - and to short term needs, yet more effective in implementing long term plans.

Other than ‘feedback’ to all action cells what are some of these principles? It is not possible in a short note to spell out and to apply them, but we will suggest a few here to demonstrate that cybernetic ideas are by no means mechanistic and that they do accord with the accepted principles of good administrative practice. It is true, however, that they go further and take a broader view of things.

“Centralise those decisions and activities that require insulation from current happenings and a long view; decentralise, disperse downward those decisions and activities that require rapid response in time or a high degree of detailed case information.”

Systems Approach: To implement such a principle it is first necessary to classify activities and decisions within the city administration in terms of categories such as (a) Is their time-scale for action short or long, (b) Are they basically internal processes (such as selection, training or accounting) or externally-oriented processes (such as bill collection, water supply or public health); (c) Do they work on current information flows or an accumulated information; (d) Are they basically doing their work according to preset rules or must they use discretion (if rules, what are they supposed to do about exceptional cases?); (e) How much training is required for this function (where does it fall in a skill hierarchy, and is that the same as the promotion hierarchy?). Categorisation along these dimensions (and other relevant ones which could be listed) will be the first step in deciding whether a decision or activity can be decentralised out to the ‘periphery’ of the administrative structure (or whether it should be insulated carefully in the heart of the structure), and the manner in which it should receive its “feedback” (whether directly from the field or after processing and analysis by a higher echelon or a special cell).

“In general, raise the proportion of the agency’s resources that are being spent upon ‘information processing’ as against program activities.” For one instance, if debates in the municipal council are recorded and indexed, we could avoid rediscovering the same facts when an issue comes up for consideration a second time. For another instance, if there was prior recording of economic activities and their locations, they can be analysed when bridge, highway, rail terminal or housing decisions have to be taken, but it is not possible to do more than use “common sense” unless the data has previously been carefully collected, screened and stored in a form suitable for ready analysis. The savings due to a single better location-decision is likely to pay for the entire information system.

“Provide a hierarchy of feedback loops to monitor, motivate and keep under control the processes in a living city.” Also, “design-in multiple information channels so that important information gets through even if some channels are ‘blocked’ for whatever reasons.” “Consciously design and use system-wide codes” - that is, common terminologies and ways of treating problems - so as to facilitate communication between different groups in or outside the administration whose cooperation may be useful. Associated with this last, and closely linked also to the idea of citizen-participation, is the new technique in organisational development called ‘**Open systems planning**’ wherein the organisational itself becomes more of an open-system, a communicating system, than a compartmentalized, formal hierarchy.

## 5. **TECHNOLOGY AND FEEDBACK SYSTEMS**

It may be asked how an innovative idea like citizen feedback can be implemented effectively. The traditional methods such as complaint books or complaint desks or inquiry counters do have permanent virtues, but even they are far more complex systems than they appear to be at first glance. Not only their location and timing but also the training, career channels and reporting hierarchy of the staff is part of the system to be planned. It is also possible to use other channels –

Here are a few -

- (a) “Open Evenings” with citizens
- (b) Mohalla-wise public meetings
- (c) Postage-free letters
- (d) Special ‘free’ phone numbers to report water, sewage emergencies
- (e) Walkie-talkies (particularly for emergencies)
- (f) Radio discussions recorded earlier at different places and followed up by group meetings around community sets
- (g) Filming and/or video taping of the municipal and other top-body meetings so that people can see for themselves how decisions are made. (Videotapes can be played-back on community center VTRs, and then used there to record citizen-feedback which can be edited and shown to the city fathers.)

## 6. **Politicians**

One participant we have not mentioned yet is the Politician. In most representative democracies, the elected politician is supposed to be the channel between the citizen and the Executive. He can plan a role; but it would not be wise to depend on him. What we feel is a via media, is to keep him in the circuit, to keep him informed of what is planned and what is going to be informed to the citizenry, so that he can contribute his own angle, and also provide prior, advanced feedback. However, why we are suggesting all the above steps is that we don’t want the Executive to wash its hands off the process and dump the responsibility for feedback back onto the politicians. What we are saying is that ultimately it is the Executive that must take responsibility for the effectiveness and efficiency of its operations. And it should of course take advantage of the existence of Politicians to ensure its success. But that is all.

## 7. **CONCLUSIONS**

After having enumerated the ‘pros’ it will be illogical not to consider the possible ‘cons’ of a feedback system also.

An efficient feedback system which guarantees prompt action on citizen-feedback can also lead to the 'monkey reaction': people would ask for things just because of the novelty of being listened to. This could degenerate into naive and even meaningless demands. They might also ask for things which they could very well do themselves or which cannot be done given various constraints, and might throw tantrums if they do not get any action.

A short run solution to this is a matter of fact, cards-on-the-table approach where any unreasonable feedback is returned with an explanation. Proper civic education can provide the long run solution.

Initially the citizens have to be told that a feedback system exists and what its mechanism is. But more important is the education which can teach them to take initiative and demand action. They should also be made to see their role in urban development and what they can do on their own without looking up to the authorities, e.g. maintenance of facilities like parks. Simultaneously, they should be made to understand the limitations on natural, financial, and manpower resources.

The process of education in this context can be through effective news and feature stories (even comic strips) in the mass communication media in the short run, and through bringing about civic awareness during school education, in the long run. This task would be made easier if the citizens have a sense of belonging to the city - have the concept of 'our city' and if the educational authorities adopt schooling "for life", instead of for examinations, as their motto.

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