Citizen's Charter

The citizen's charter is a document that outlines the service commitment of organizations or service providers towards providing quality, high-standard services, including mechanisms for grievance redressal.

This is an important topic for Indian polity and governance segments of the IAS exam. In this article, you can read all about the citizen's charter – its importance, principles, features, components, criticisms, etc.

Citizen's Charter – Introduction

The Citizen's Charter is a voluntary and written document that spells out the service provider's efforts taken to focus on their commitment towards fulfilling the needs of the citizens/customers.

- It also includes how citizens can redress any grievances.
- It includes what the citizens can expect out of the service provider.
- The concept is that the charter preserves the trust between the service provider and the citizens/users.

The concept of a citizen's charter was initiated by former British Prime Minister John Major in the year 1991. It was started as a national programme intended to improve the quality of public services. In 1998, in the UK, the concept was renamed 'Services First'.

Principles of Citizen's Charter (As originally framed)

- **Quality –** Improving service quality.
- **Choice –** Wherever possible.
- **Standards –** Specifically mention what to expect and how to go about if standards are not met.
- **Value –** For taxpayers' money.
- **Accountability –** At the level of the individual and the organization.
- **Transparency –** Transparency in rules/schemes/procedures/grievances.

After the adoption by the UK, several other countries adopted a citizen's charter under different names and forms. The basic idea was the same, however, to enhance the quality of services offered to the public, and have transparency and accountability in public services.

The 6 principles as laid out by the government in the UK, were later elaborated in 1998. The Labour government, then, brought out the following **nine principles of Service Delivery**:

1. Set standards of service
2. Be open and provide full information
3. Consult and involve

4. Encourage access and the promotion of choice
5. Treat all fairly
6. Put things right when they go wrong
7. Use resources effectively
8. Innovate and improve
9. Work with other providers

Citizen's Charter in India

In India, the concept of citizen's charter was first adopted at a **'Conference of Chief Ministers of various States and Union Territories'** held in May 1997 in the national capital.

- A major outcome of the conference was a decision to formulate Citizen's Charters by the central and state governments, beginning with sectors with a large public interface such as the railways, telecom, posts, PDS, etc.
- The charters were mandated to include service standards, the time limit that the people can expect to be served, mechanisms for redressing grievances, and a provision for unbiased scrutiny by consumer/citizen groups.
- The task of coordination, formulation, and operationalization of citizen's charters are done by the **Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG)**.
- In India, in this context, citizens can mean not only citizens but also all stakeholders such as customers, clients, beneficiaries, ministries/departments/organizations, state/UT governments, etc.
- The Indian model of citizen's charter is an adaptation from the UK model. One additional component of the charter in the Indian version is the inclusion of the point 'expectation from clients'.
- The DARPG website lists more than 700 charters adopted by various government agencies across India.
- The Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011 (Citizens Charter) was introduced in the Lok Sabha in December 2011. It was referred to a Standing Committee which submitted its report in 2012. **The bill, however, lapsed due to the dissolution of the Lok Sabha in 2014.**
- Citizen's charters are not legally enforceable documents. They are just guidelines to enhance service delivery to citizens.

Citizen's Charter Components

A good citizen's charter should include the following details:

1. Organization's vision and mission statements.
2. A business carried out and other such details of the organization.
3. Explain who are citizens and clients.
4. Statement of services including quality, time-frame, etc. offered to citizens and how to get those services.

5. Grievance redressal mechanisms.
6. Expectations from citizens/clients.
7. Additional commitments like the amount of compensation in case of service delivery failure.

Other Elements of a Good Citizen's Charter

- Should be in simple language
- The focus should be on the requirements of the customers
- There should be periodic review
- Reliability should be imbibed – that is, consistency in performance/delivery

Objectives of Citizen's Charters

The basic objective of the citizen's charters is to **empower citizens** through the delivery of public services.

- Improve the quality of public services
- Ensuring transparency and right to information
- Save the time of both the customer and the service provider
- Have clear targets for all levels of services

Features of Citizen's Charters

The salient features of a citizen's charter are given below:

- Lays down clear standards for the delivery of services. The standards should be measurable, time-bound, relevant, specific, and accurate.
- Gives full information about the services, in simple language, as to what services are available, level of quality to expect, grievance mechanism, etc.
- Wherever possible, the charter should offer a choice of services to the clients.
- It should also be made with regular consultation with all stakeholders including customers, to ascertain the quality standards.
- It should encourage a culture of courtesy and helpfulness among the personnel of the service provider.

Significance of Citizen's Charters

Citizen's charters are significant in that they empower citizens when it comes to public services.

- It boosts accountability in the delivery of public services.
- It enhances good governance. It improves the effectiveness of organizations by having measurable standards.
- It augments the quality of services delivered by incorporating an internal and external monitoring entity.

- Being citizen-centric, it creates a professional and customer-oriented environment for the delivery of services.
- It also helps boost the morale of the staff.
- It enhances transparency and openness.

However, there are some drawbacks also associated with these charters. They are mentioned in the below section.

Challenges faced in implementing Citizen's Charters in India

- A general perception is that these are seen as a mere formality. There is no involvement from the personnel and citizens and the whole exercise is carried out because it was a command from the top.
- It can overburden organizations and government agencies. It might also divert the attention of the personnel from their work.
- Improper training of the staff leads to the charter being merely drafted and not implemented properly.
- In certain cases, unrealistic charters are drafted. This can lead to expectations not being met.
- The citizen's charter is not legally enforceable. This has made them ineffective in a real sense.
- Generally, the charters are drafted unilaterally by the service provider without taking into consideration the opinions and feedback of the customers. NGOs are also not consulted.
- There is also a lack of infrastructure in the country to go side-by-side with this initiative.
- There is a need for a team effort to implement the charter in its true spirit. There is a hierarchy gap between officers and field staff, which leads to a lack of coordination and motivation.
- The charters are not periodically revised.
- It is also seen that the needs of the disabled and senior citizens are not taken into account while framing.
- Sometimes, the rules and procedures are found to be excessively complicated.
- There is a lack of awareness among the public about citizen's charters.
- Standards defined are generally not measurable making the whole exercise ineffective.
- It is seen that organizations themselves are not keen to implement and adhere to their charters.
- There is a tendency to have a uniform citizen's charter for all agencies, departments, etc. under the same parent organization. The charter should be customized as per the needs and functioning of the particular office/agency.
- There are only a few more than 700 charters adopted in the country. It is still a long way to go in terms of universal charter adoption.

2nd ARC Recommendations

The Second Administrative Reforms Commission (AC) had made recommendations to improve the effectiveness of citizen's charters. Some of the recommendations are:

- They should specify the remedy/compensation in the case of any default in meeting the standards mentioned in the charters.
- Charters should restrict a few promises that can be kept rather than have a long unfulfilled list.
- Before making a charter, the organization should restructure its set-up and processes.
- There should not be a uniform charter across organizations. They should be local and customized.
- All stakeholders must be kept on board while drafting the charters.
- Commitments made should be firm and there should be a citizen-friendly redressal mechanism.
- Officers should be held accountable if commitments made are not fulfilled.
- The citizen's charters should be reviewed and revised regularly.

Aspirants can go through the following links to have relevant information on these topics and prepare for the upcoming UPSC examination even better –

Reforms for Citizen Charter to make them Effective

- Not everyone fits in the same mold: Citizen Charter should be formulated as a decentralized activity with the head office providing only broad guidelines.
- Wide consultation process: formulation of Citizen Charter should be done after extensive consultations within the organization followed by meaningful dialogue with civil society.
- Commitments of the firms should be made: Citizen Charter should be precise and must make firm commitments of service delivery standards to the citizens or consumers in quantifiable terms wherever possible.
- Provide Redressal mechanism in case of default: Citizen charter should clearly lay down the relief which the organization is bound to provide if it has defaulted on the promised standards of delivery.
- Periodic evaluation: A citizen charter should be evaluated from time to time preferably through an external agency.
- Officers to be held accountable for results: In cases where there is a default in adhering to the Citizen Charter, fix specific responsibility.
- Society should be a part of it: To help in improvement in the contents of the Charter, Civil Society should be included in it. They should be a part of the process, its adherence as well as in educating the citizens about the importance of the vital mechanism of the Citizen Charter.

Way Forward

- A Citizens' Charter is a means to an end it cannot be an end in itself. It is a tool to ensure that the citizen is always at the heart of any service delivery mechanism.
- Drawing from best practice models such as the Sevottam Model (a Service Delivery Excellence Model) can help Citizen's Charter in becoming more citizen-centric.

Important Questions

When was Citizen Charter introduced in India?

It was introduced in India in 1997.

Why is a Citizen Charter important?

It is an important tool in public administration that can enhance the quality of service offered to citizens, improve transparency, and foster trust in the system.

What is the Citizen Charter Act?

The Citizen's Charter and Grievance Redressal Bill 2011 is also known as the Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011. This was introduced in Parliament in 2011 but the bill has now lapsed.

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