QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN CIVIL SERVICES: LESSONS FOR BANGLADESH

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Introduction

Quality, standard, productivity and service have become key words in the lexicon of public sector reform in many developed and some developing countries in recent years. The increasing prominence given to these terms is the result of change in the mindset of customers of public service. The rising expectation and changing perception of customers in terms of quality and standard of service to be provided by public service personnel at all levels has heralded a 'mini revolution' in terms of new ideas and innovation. These ideas and innovation are all geared to the attainment of three Es - economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

Some of the countries in Southeast Asia have played a prominent role in reforming their civil services to bring about quality in service delivery. Quality and service delivery is closely linked with standard and productivity. Quality service cannot be provided without provision for high standard and increasing productivity.

The paper reviews quality improvement (QI) measures in two countries and one special region in China in Southeast Asia. The two countries and special region chosen are Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. These QI
measures form critical aspects of administrative reform (AR) measures of these two countries and special region. The paper also draws some lessons as to how Bangladesh can learn from such successes and can consequently bring about changes in the structure and practices of its civil service.

**Conceptual Framework**

Today "quality in public services is recognized as the right of all citizens" (Gaster 1995:1). This concern for quality needs to be understood both in the context of changing expectation of customers as indicated above as well as pressure of globalisation. Globalisation has posed a serious threat to the concept of nation-state as well as encouraged market economy. Added to all these civil servants in many countries of Asia work under an unfavourable environment. The symptoms are too much demand, too little supply, unclear and unambiguous goals leading to corner-cutting and low morale (Gaster 1995:1).

So quality as a concept is important. Yet, it is extremely difficult to define it to the minutest detail. Values influence nature of quality. Some of these values include economy, efficiency and effectiveness; equity, equality and environment; democracy, accountability, improvement and community. Though there is no universal agreement in terms of definition of quality, still some important assumptions are put forward from research on total quality management (TQM) that emphasises on the nature, process and focus of quality (Morgan and Murgatroyd 1994: 4-13). These assumptions can be summarised, as quality must be a component of the organisation from the very beginning and the responsibility of quality standards needs to be shared by
all. Quality needs to be understood as a deliberate effort to eliminate error and reduce waste in each and every aspect of an organisation's activities. Customer is the end-user or purchaser of a service or product and his / her preference and taste be kept in mind. Customer satisfaction is the most important aspect of quality and from this perspective quality has been defined. According to both European Organisation for Quality Control and the American Society for Quality Control, quality refers to "the totality of features of a product or service that bears its ability to satisfy given needs" (quoted in Morgan and Murgatroyd 1994: 8). This definition makes it amply clear that the customer is the person who determines quality of a service or product. The next question that naturally emerges is that what factors determine or influence customers' perception of quality in service provisions. Service quality judgements are determined by such factor as reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding/ knowing the customer and appearance/presentation (Morgan and Murgatroyd 1994:11).

**Quality Improvement in Southeast Asian Civil Service**

In the civil services of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Hong Kong SAR), Malaysia and Singapore modernisation and improvements in the quality of administration had been and continue to be critical components. Changes and innovations have been introduced at regular frequencies with the aim to upgrade service delivery to satisfy the needs of the customers, i.e., and citizens. Below a few quality improvement measures of one special region in China and two countries in Southeast Asia are discussed.
Hong Kong SAR

In Hong Kong, administrative reform measures gained momentum after 1989. Initially, the focus concentrated on creation of new branches with added responsibilities and drawing up many programmes and plans in such areas as medical and health service, housing, social welfare and education (Khan 2000). Corruption, a widely prevalent malaise in the civil service at that time, was effectively checked with the creation of the Independent Commission against Corruption (ICAC) in 1974. The commission was given wide array of powers that included arresting people on suspicion, searching and seizing without an warrant, requiring information, freezing assets and property and preventing people from leaving the country (Caiden 1991: 249).

Push towards reform and modernisation accelerated with the publication of a government report in 1989 titled Public Sector Reform (PSR). The PSR was influenced by then fashionable global paradigm New Public Management (NPM). The NPM emanated from various reform movements in the Anglo-American countries, namely the UK, New Zealand and US (Hood 1991). The last British Governor of Hong Kong Chris Patten played a key role in the establishment of an Efficiency Unit and introducing Performance Pledges (PPs) in 1992. These two developments are considered to have ushered in a new era of consumerism to Hong Kong public administration (Common 1999:432). Both the initiatives were intended to establish a client-bared culture in Hong Kong civil service. The Efficiency Units was intended to bring about significant reforms in human resource management and to act as "an agent of change with authority from top to cross-traditional boundaries" (Sankey 1993: 84). Performance Pledges (PPs) initiative, a key responsibility of
the Unit (Common 1999:432) would "pressure departments into adopting basic public sector reform principles more urgently" (Sankey 1993:84). The concept of citizen as customers figured prominently in both Efficiency Units and PP initiatives. These pledges would set out precisely what standards customers should expect from public services; how to judge whether those standards met; and what to do when they are not (Patten 1992). So PPs, in effect, are basic guarantees of minimum standards of public services (Common 1999:432). Though the Efficiency Units and PPs as ideas have substantially been influenced by the Citizen's Charter in the UK, they have significantly improved service quality in Hong Kong public administration and retained by China after transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty from Britain. At the heart of these initiatives the intention was to achieve efficiency, effectiveness and flexibility in government operations to serve the people better.

**Malaysia**

Administrative reform (AR) was a priority area for Malaysian policy makers when it gained independence little over four decades ago. In the 1960s, Development Administration Unit was established in the Prime Minister's Department to identify and implement administrative improvements in the public service (Khan 2000). The 1970s saw a number of institutional reform initiatives that led to the creation of Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (MAMMPU). The MAMMPU was to study and identify major administrative problems at all levels of government and recommend necessary changes and appropriate measures to overcome them.
A number of changes and innovations have been introduced in the Malaysian civil service during last two decades. Maintaining quality of service, enhancing productivity, ensuring integrity and accountability and institutionalising success have been the key cornerstones of Malaysian administrative reforms (Khan 2000). Our focus here is restricted in analysing quality and productivity initiatives.

Under quality, a number of AR measures have already been implemented. These include TQM, PSN and CSL, counter services and client’s charter (Khan 2000). Total Quality Management (TQM) is intended to mobilise all available resources in public sector agencies to meet customer requirements (Sarji 1995: 100). TQM creates more customer-focused organisations that are viable and willing to provide better service to customers. Quality Control Circles (QCCs) and TQM appeared in 1989 under the theme of the 'Excellent Work Culture Movement' which all government agencies were directed to implement (Common 1993: 433). QCCs are to mobilise expertise, experience and employee creativity in problem solving (Commonwealth Secretariat 1995a: 3). Public Service Network (PSN) and Civil Service Link (CSL) are mechanisms to electronically deliver information, services and facilitate electronic commerce (Khan 2000). PSN is used to renew driving and business licenses through computer and network facilities in the post offices. CSL is an information centre that caters to the needs of the private sector in such areas as permits and licenses and taxation rates. The objective in both cases is to gradually move to an area of paperless bureaucracy (Commonwealth Secretariat 1995b: 65). Counter service attempts to provide some basic services, i.e., identity cards, passports, sale of postage stamps, and collections of bill payments.
The objective here is to provide fast, accurate and continuous service to customers on a regular basis. Clients' Charter, introduced in 1993, in the context of a public sector organisation, contains its written commitment to its user: it is a guarantee of service (Chiu 1997:176). Complete customer satisfaction is the objective. A number of policy measures have already been implemented to improve productivity in the civil service. These included a New Remuneration System, Malaysian Incorporated Policy and privatisation of government agencies and utilisation of information technology.

**Singapore**

Initial reforms in Singapore after independence aimed at moulding the attitude of the civil servants and to bring about some structural changes in the civil service (Khan 1998b: 383). Corruption prevention has been one of the most important items of the reform package. The anti-corruption agency Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau enjoys wide-ranging powers and responsibilities that include safeguarding the integrity of the public services, encouraging corruption-free transactions in the private sector, responsibility for checking and investigating malpractice by public officials, reviewing work methods and procedures of corruption-prone departments and bodies and identifying administrative weaknesses that could facilitate corruption and recommending remedial and preventive measures (Singapore 1997:53-54). Recent AR measures, introduced and implemented with regular frequency, have brought important changes throughout the civil service. The major reform initiatives included devolution of personnel management, autonomy to government agencies, broadening and enhancing quality of Administrative Service, curbing corruption, competitive
pay for high-fliers, selective recruitment of the best and the brightest, utilisation of information technology, institutionalising and integrating change and increasing productivity (Khan 1998b: 386-416; Quah 1995: 147). Though all the measures have contributed in different degrees to bring about and maintain quality in the civil service, the discussion here is limited specifically to the matters of change and productivity.

The Public Service for 21st Century (PS 21) initiative launched in May 1995 lies at the core of institutionalising and integrating change throughout the civil service. The PS 21 incorporates within it other earlier public sector service improvement initiatives like Public Contact Improvement Programme, Service Improvement Unit and Work Improvement Teams. The PS 21 aims at nurturing an attitude of service excellence in meeting the needs of the public with high standards of quality and courtesy; and to foster an environment which induces and welcomes continuous change for greater efficiency and cost effectiveness by employing modern management tools and techniques while paying attention to the morale and welfare of public services (PS 21 Office 1995: 3).

Enhancing productivity in the civil service continues to be an important commitment of the government. A National Productivity Council was set up in 1981 to review productivity efforts, suggest policies and strategies to improve productivity. A Central Productivity Steering Committee and Civil Service Productivity Movement also began in 1981 (Khan 2000). One of the outcomes of all these was the formation of Work Improvement Teams (WITs). Productivity enhancement in civil service centers on WITs. A WIT is a group of civil servants from the same work unit, irrespective of job status, who meets regularly to identify, discuss and analyse problems, work out
solutions to problems and then implement these solutions (Khan 2000).

**Lessons for Bangladesh**

Civil service continues to play a significant role in Bangladesh society and encompasses political, social and economic spheres. In spite of its overarching role, the civil service remains totally inadequate, ill equipped and out-of-tune with the present reality. Successive major administrative reform measures have been resisted and consequently failed to be implemented (Khan 1998a). Bureaucratic culture demonstrates both systemic rigidities and behavioural dysfunction of bureaucrats. These are excessive reliance on hierarchy, elaborate formal rules and regulations, excessive control, lack of trust in subordinates, diffusion of accountability through overlapping checks and balances, and a loss of accountability and control (Khan, et. al. 1989:9). Other dysfunctional aspects of bureaucratic behaviour include centralisation of authority, multiple layers of decision making, a regulatory modus operandi, systemic lack of trust, lack of adequate public accountability, lack of commitment and lack of an incentive structure (Bretts. et. al. 1988:97-98).

In Bangladesh, a conducive culture needs to be nurtured that encourages, supports and respects reform. Vision for future is very important here. There is a crying need to look at civil service from the perspective of nation's progress and development. Partisan attitude and placating sectarian interest will not help. There must be a clear and unambiguous commitment of the political leadership to uphold merit principle in all aspects of the civil service. There is no scope to compromise or fiddle with merit
principle. No justification is enough to bypass the merit principle as a civil service based on any other principle will be weak, inefficient, corrupt and partisan. Periodic appointment of commissions/committees, a favourite hobby of successive governments have done almost nothing to substantially change the inherited bureaucratic edifice nor has it helped to bring about positive changes in the attitudes and behavioural patterns of civil servants.

Bangladesh can profitably learn how to improve quality of service from the experiences of some of the Southeast Asian civil services discussed above. The lessons are numerous and varied. Political commitment as demonstrated by concrete policy decisions is a must for successfully introducing changes that would bring quality in service delivery and enhance productivity of civil servants. Key political leaders should strongly support and monitor important reform initiatives.

Reform measures must be country-specific and must suit the peculiar needs and aspirations of its people. So there must be a clear understanding that abrupt and undiluted reform experiments of another country cannot be transplanted in a different national context. The attrition rate in such a situation is bound to be high.

As has been indicated earlier that the merit principle should be used as the sole criterion on which all decisions pertaining the civil service needs to be taken. Meritorious civil servants must be encouraged by giving them accelerated promotion, appropriate training, higher emoluments and choice postings.

Reform exercise should be a regular activity. These exercises need to be guided by exceptionally talented civil servants with ideas and ability and who are not afraid to argue and push for their cause in the face of adversity and opposition.
Conclusion

Quality of public service is critical for a number of reasons. It enables prompt delivery, accessibility, convenience, courtesy, responsiveness particularly to changing needs, fair and impartial service and active listening (APO 1998: 7). All these benefits of quality service are enjoyed by residents of Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. On the other hand, the experience of Bangladesh is opposite. This is because civil servants lack effective training, hold indifferent attitude towards people, lack awareness to change, operate within burdensome and cumbersome legal and administrative framework, suffer from inconsistency of policies and absence of effective coordination and co-operation among various agencies of the government as well as between public and private organisations. All these are clear symptoms of poor governance and naturally result in poor service. Learning from Southeast Asian countries would be difficult but Bangladesh have very little option. Challenges of a volatile and uncertain future must be met with bold and innovative reform policies designed to ensure quality public service and enhanced productivity.
References


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