



Listening to citizens in crisis: innovations in feedback mechanisms from Bangladesh

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Overview

Governments worldwide are establishing systems for listening and responding to citizens. But do they work? And for whom? Experienced with innovating under pressure, the Government of Bangladesh developed new mechanisms for gathering and responding to citizen feedback during the COVID19 pandemic.

The *Feedback State* project considered the mechanisms used to gather citizens' feedback about their health and social protection needs during the pandemic, and how successful these mechanisms were; how central government encouraged or enabled local government to respond; and what government actors learned about the value of citizen feedback.

Key findings:

- Online apps helped Bangladesh vaccinate its population efficiently; 8 out of 10 Bangladeshis registered [using the Surokha app](#)
- However, most people still prefer customary, face-to-face ways of getting information, services, and registering grievances, partly because of the confusing array of hotlines, in-person and digital platforms for feedback and complaint
- Bangladesh's successful innovations with citizen feedback highlight the importance of integrating offline in-person citizen engagement with online platforms for managing data intelligently
- People must know about and be able to use existing feedback mechanisms; civil society actors can help promote understanding, use, and ensure official response
- Government agencies, contractors and NGOs tasked with building grievance redress mechanisms need to know about these findings, to improve their accountability to citizens and service-users, and to the aid donors who fund them

This brief provides a short summary of the *Feedback State* research project, a broad overview of its findings, and relevant policy recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

Are Feedback Mechanisms Working?

[Governments all around the world are building systems specifically designed to listen and respond to citizens' concerns.](#) Elections cannot enable citizens to give detailed feedback on each policy or programme, and—even in the most robust democracies—these only happen every few years. When citizens are unhappy with governments, they take to the streets in protest. At the same time, developing countries that borrow from [international development finance organizations like the World Bank, or receive funds from other aid agencies, are increasingly required to put in place mechanisms for people to complain](#) when projects go wrong, they are harmed by the project, or to highlight corruption in its implementation. But while these mechanisms have grown in number, scale and significance, [little is known about how and whether they work.](#)

How to listen and respond to citizens took on added urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic, when great uncertainty, grave risk, and widespread lockdown spurred innovation in such mechanisms. [With an established record of learning from crises, Bangladesh](#) had already put in place reforms to enable citizens to participate in the governance process, including through strengthening mechanisms of feedback. The 'Perceptions on Government Feedback Mechanisms During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Household Survey Findings Report' studied how successfully the Bangladeshi state learned to listen and respond to its citizens' needs regarding health and social protection during the pandemic. The lessons have wider relevance for other governments seeking to do better at listening and delivering more effective services.

The Feedback State

'The Feedback State: Listening and Responding to Bangladeshi Citizens during the COVID19 Pandemic' project was led by researchers at BRAC University, American University, Jahangirnagar University, the University of Rajshahi, and the Manusher Jonno Foundation, and was funded by the UK Government's FCDO, under the [Institute of Development Studies' CLEAR programme.](#)

The project comprised four research components: policy process tracing, to assess national level policy processes for local governance reforms and mechanisms introduced to gather and respond to citizen feedback on health and social protection services; [a nationally representative sample survey](#) from the 2011 Population Census (of equal numbers of men and women using a multistage stratified random sampling approach and a sample size of 2400, distributed randomly across 33 of Bangladesh's 64 districts, reflecting the national urban-rural proportion); local level case studies of local governments identified as successfully enabling citizen feedback and response; and transnational accountability mechanisms, assessing how citizen engagement mechanisms were deployed in World Bank COVID-19 projects.

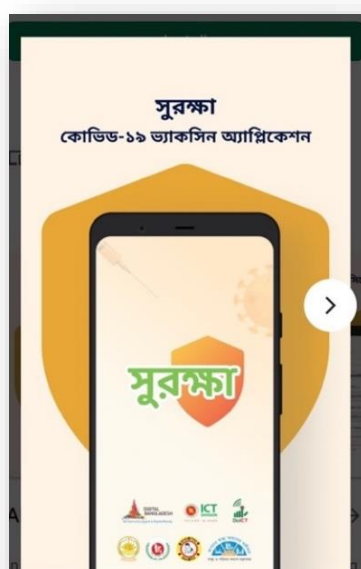
Study Results

The research uncovered a **generally positive appraisal of official efforts to gather feedback from citizens**. State officials, political representatives, development partners, and in particular, citizens all approved of the aspiration to systematically listen to citizen feedback. This marks a significant cultural change from when the state had been expected to broadcast and inform citizens (a top-down approach to communication).

Our research identifies a move towards a greater expectation that the state should taking effective proactive steps to listen and respond to citizens' perspectives and concerns. The pandemic also introduced a shift in ways of working and organisational culture within the government, notably towards more online and digital modes of operation, speeding up information-sharing. In principle, this makes it possible for citizen feedback to travel easily, rapidly, and in aggregate forms—from the frontline to the centre.

However, while people value **formal feedback mechanisms highly, trust in their effectiveness was lower**. Our research showed broad consensus across sectors of society that official efforts to listen to citizens were in good faith, but that they were not (yet) very effective, for reasons that included people's preference for face-to-face and in-person interactions, and because people do not in general believe complaint will be effective. In the gap between aspiration and reality, individuals and civil society groups were seen trying to help people be heard and responded to.

Despite a strong and consistent emphasis on digital and online formal systems for citizen feedback and response, the research found that **analogue and informal means of communicating concerns and requesting assistance remained the most important** means of citizens providing their feedback. At the same time, there are valid concerns that the shift towards electronic modes of service delivery is not being matched by attention to issues of rights to privacy and the scope for misuse of data and digital platforms for surveillance and/or harassment of citizens.



Nevertheless, more than a decade's worth of investment in digitalisation and online systems appears to have paid off in improving government capacities for internal communications and operations during the pandemic, for communicating with citizens, and in launching the successful Surokha application, which enabled people to register for the vaccine and helped track uptake.

Figure 1 The Surokha app Source: authors' image from app store; accessed 28 August 2023

Figure 2 Surokha app usage (% of respondents). Source: BIGD Survey

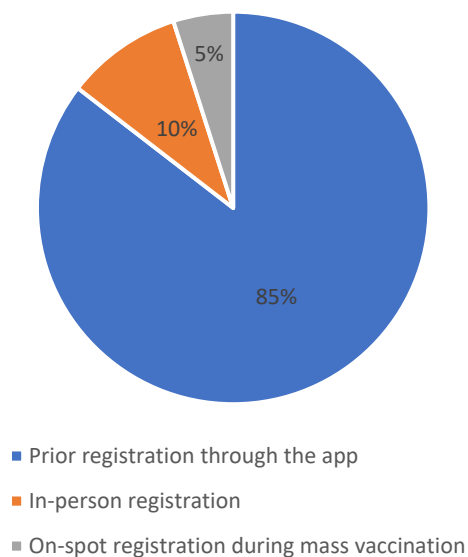
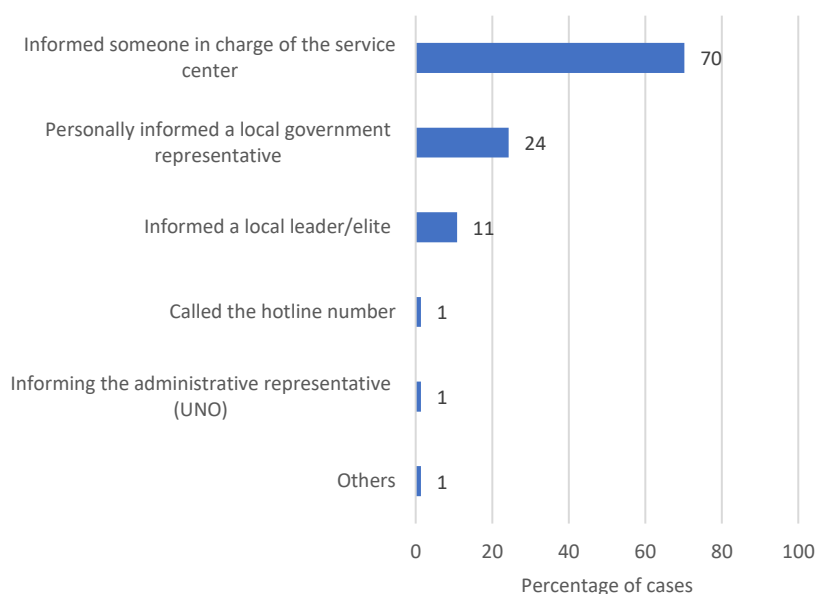


Figure 3 How people resolved problems with receiving the COVID-19 vaccine (multiple answers possible). Source: BRAC Institute of Governance and Development 2023 survey



Capacities for response and resolution of citizen concerns remain uneven. The effectiveness of responses to citizens’ concerns is determined by political priorities and state capacities. There are many fragmented platforms for gathering citizen feedback and providing information; this is challenging both for citizens to navigate and state actors to use.

Figure 4 Hotlines and helplines for citizens to contact government agencies. Source: collected by the authors from government websites and sources



Policy Recommendations

- **Explore the scope for creating a unified system for citizen feedback and response**
 - **A unified system for all types of feedback and complaint to be gathered, sorted, and monitored centrally** has the potential to improve both the citizen-user experience of giving feedback, and government capacities to respond to individual grievances and concerns, and improve policies and programmes.
 - **A central system would help public awareness of the system**, ensuring people don't have to search for the right actor or platform to complain or request services, and help create transparency about the rates and nature of citizen feedback, and government responses and resolutions.
 - **The Bangladesh 333 hotline should be more systematically assessed.** There are relevant examples to study closely and learn from (e.g., [Nepal's 'Hello Sarkar' system](#) and [Indonesia's Lapor system](#)). Since these findings and recommendations were disseminated, the 333 hotline has become the single entry-point for queries and complaints to government (as of January 2024).
 - **Stronger investment is needed in capacities for feedback response.** There is limited value in listening to citizens better unless there is also the scope to respond. Governments must ensure feedback systems are a high priority and protected from political interference or mal-governance. They should also ensure that feedback feeds into policy response, and that common complaints are investigated thoroughly and policy actions taken to prevent common problems from occurring in the first place.
- **Strengthen frontline face-to-face systems for receiving and handling feedback**
 - **Most citizen feedback is still conveyed through face-to-face interaction** with trusted local authorities or state actors. Analogue and offline interfaces need strengthening for more effectiveness.

- **Digital platforms, hotlines and other ICT-enabled systems can't yet receive or manage the majority of feedback, but will play a growing role.** They are also an effective means of feedback data gathering, processing and sharing. Earlier investments in digitalisation pay off in crises, facilitating government operational capacities and both internal and external communications.
- **Attention must be paid to ensuring ethical, legal, and rights-based approaches to collecting and using citizens' data, both online and off.**
- **Partner with citizen groups to raise awareness and support participation**
 - **Governments need to be more proactive in partnering with civic actors to develop nascent feedback systems.** Citizen feedback systems work best when organized civic groups (local social organizations and civil society networks) are able to support citizens in their efforts to be heard or to complain—in particular, vulnerable and less-educated people who live with poverty or marginalisation, including women and minority groups.
- **Development partners should proactively support citizen feedback and redress mechanisms**
 - **Feedback and redress systems offer considerable promise for strengthening the relationship between citizens and their state to strategically improve accountability, transparency, and service delivery.** Development partners such as the World Bank require government projects to undertake citizen engagement and install grievance redress mechanisms, yet currently are neither actively encouraging them in this process, nor requiring government learning from their successes and challenges.
 - **The growth of citizen feedback and response systems within the Bangladesh Government marks a remarkable shift in the ways in which the state interacts with the people,** and merits far more attention and support than development partners are currently providing.

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