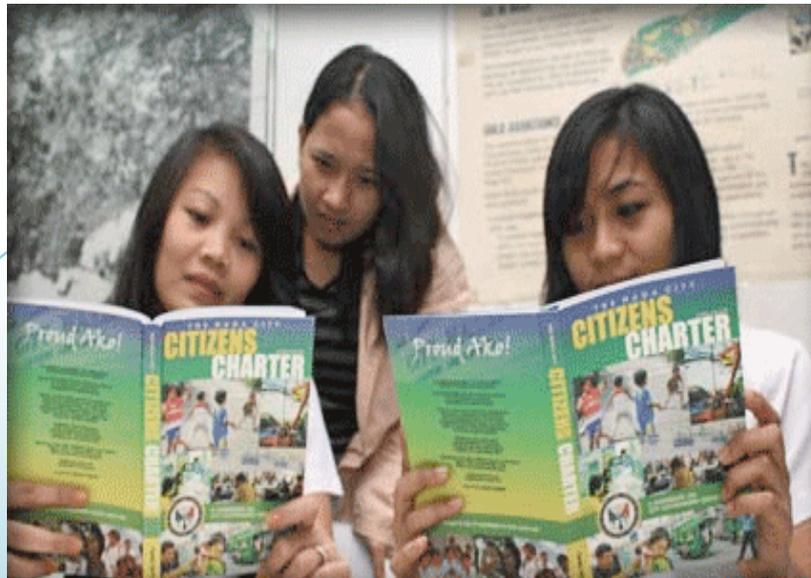## Module 4: Social Accountability Tool

Citizen's Charter

Citizen's Charter

1- What is a Citizen's Charter?

A Citizen's charter is a document that informs citizen's about:

- the service entitlements they have as users of a public service,
- the standards they can expect for a service (time frame and quality),
- remedies available for non-adherence to standards, and
- the procedures, costs and charges of a service.

Separate charters are usually designed for distinct services and/or organizations and agencies. Sometimes, citizens' obligations or acts that are subject to fines are also listed.

2- Purpose

The Citizen's charter aims to improve the quality of services by publishing standards which users can expect for each service they receive from the Government. The charters entitle users to an explanation (and in some cases compensation) if the standards are not met. If citizens are well informed about their rights as clients of public services and about existing complaint mechanisms to voice grievances, they can exert considerable pressure on service providers to improve their performance. The charters also play an important role for other social accountability mechanisms. The standards which service providers commit themselves to are useful yardsticks for monitoring and evaluation of service delivery.

3- Principals for Implementation

For successful implementation of a citizen's charter, the following points should be taken into consideration:

a- **Involve all stakeholders in the process:** Users, government officials and service providers should be integrated into all stages of the process: designing the charter, monitoring implementation and follow-up.

b- **Do Not promise more than you can deliver:** While users should be given a chance to voice their demands, it is important that the charter contains only commitments that the provider can realistically fulfill. However, the standards should be set at a level that encourages the agency to improve performance.

c- **The citizen's charter is a process:** Designing the written document is not a one-off exercise with a final outcome. The document is just one step in the process of strengthening social accountability. To have an impact, it needs to be disseminated widely, be put to use, and reviewed periodically.

d- **Dissemination and awareness building:** In order to achieve the goal of improving service delivery it is important that:
- the charter is written in a simple language
- the charter is well known by both users and providers (staff at all levels)
- If the public is well-informed about their user-entitlements and able to voice their concerns in case of unsatisfactory performance, this will give the providers a feeling of being watched and put pressure on them to perform well.

e- **Enforcement:** There is a danger that citizen's charters remain a paper-exercise because the complaint mechanism is ineffective. Often, the users have limited scope for action if their complaints are ignored although in some instances, the charter is made a legally binding document. For good enforcement, the provider needs

adequate internal complaints handling procedures. External dispute handling mechanisms should be put in place.

f- Citizen's charters have been employed in many countries around the world, including the UK (who was the pioneer for this accountability mechanism), Canada, Australia, Malaysia, India (at sub-national levels).

g- Examples of citizen's charter documents in India can be found at the website of the Praja Foundation, Mumbai.

Challenges
- Skepticism on the part of officials
- Lack of awareness among the citizens as well as the municipal officials
- Paucity of data with the ULBs
- Infrastructural flaws (outdated systems for storage of data, lack of skilled or technically trained staff, logistic support within the municipality)
- Lack of openness to transparency/display of information
- Multiple authorities dealing with the same services