
CITIZEN'S CHARTERS

A COMPARATIVE GLOBAL SURVEY

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Cases

Great Britain: *Sustainability and Adaptability since the Origin of the “Citizen’s Charter”*

South Africa: *Not Mere Words; the Change has to be Deep*

Argentina: *Making the Citizen Explicit in Citizen’s Charters*

United States: *“Customer Service” as a driving force of Internal Restructuring, and the Integration of Systems of Communication from Social Security to 311 Chicago*

Philippines: *“i-Governance” and the Citizen’s Charter of Naga City*

Spain: *The Adoption of Service Charters in Different Levels of Government*

India: *The Role of Civil Society and the Charter of Mumbai*

Findings

References

INTRODUCTION

What is a Citizen Charter?

A Citizen's Charter represents a promise from a government agency in which it publicly commits itself to fulfill a series of expectations related to provision of services, transparency of information and efficient use of resources, thus establishing a mechanism between the agency and the citizens to correct errors and improve the quality of services.

Most Citizen's Charters consist of a written document signed by the highest executive of the public institution, whether it is a ministry or a municipality. In other occasions the Letter is more specifically issued at a departmental level within a public institution. The Letter is a document that defines *what* services will be rendered, *how* and *when* they will be provided and *who* is responsible for the project. Also, most Letters contain procedures to file a grievance in case of noncompliance. The next section, "Cases", illustrates these elements in further detail, as well as the ways in which they resemble each other, or differ, according to the model employed.

The former definition is actually the more overt definition of the Citizen's Charter. Implicitly, however, the Citizen's Charter is a tool through which society seeks to improve the performance and the quality of its public institutions. The assumption is that to a great extent the problem of performance and quality derives from a gap between the demands of the citizens and the structures and processes of the public institutions in charge of fulfilling them. A Citizen's Charter is conceived, therefore, as an instrument to close that gap.

The first Citizen's Charters appeared in the early 1990s as part of the movement that was later called New Public Management (NPG)¹ and they are an offshoot of the processes of Top Quality Management (TQM). TQM had already existed for over two decades as a concept to drive the reengineering of processes in private enterprises, with the ultimate goal of focusing them on the needs of the customer. The purpose of this process was to educate the workers of the company about the needs of the customer in order to satisfy those needs, instead of satisfying the needs of internal bureaucracies. In general terms, the New Public Administration, and the Citizen's Charters, as a specific tool, represent the adaptation of these concepts of the private sector to the public sector.

From its origin to its adaptation in different countries

The Citizen's Charter was created in England in 1991, during the government of Prime Minister John Major, and in a few years it started to travel all over the world, first to the United States and Canada, then to other European countries (France, Spain, Belgium, Italy, Finland, Ireland), Asia Minor (India, Nepal), and more recently to Africa (South Africa, Namibia) and Latin America (Argentina and now Mexico).² Aside from emerging as a key element of a platform of national reform, the Letters have been adopted at local levels, as in the case of Naga City in the Philippines, as well as in many Spanish cities and autonomous communities.

CASES

From this diversity of experiences with Citizen's Charters we seek to identify a range of relevant lessons that have been learned. To this end, this section presents and analyzes the experiences of England, India, the Philippines, the United States and Argentina. Finally, in the section that follows it, we seek to generalize about these international experiences.

GREAT BRITAIN: Sustainability and Adaptability

In July of 1991, after the publication of an official document,³ the first Citizen's Charter came to light under the conservative government of John Major. For its implementation, a new Unit of Government was established, supervised by a cabinet minister. Under the direction of this Unit, and backed by the strong and decisive support of the then Prime Minister Major, all public services were encouraged to create and sign Charters. Originally, those Charters were ruled by six basic principles:

1. Standards
2. Information and Transparency
3. Choice of Service and Advisory
4. Courtesy
5. Correction of Errors
6. Financial Value

After three years, England had 38 Charters.⁴ This first experiment with Citizen's Charters arose from a conservative posture, and at that time it was radically opposite to what had been the post-war English experience: now the Government had to be subjected to the same "market rigor" required of private enterprises. That implied competition among service providers and the adoption of the methodology of Total Quality Control (TQC), with the purpose of focusing the administrative processes on the citizen from its very beginning up to the delivery of the product or service. In a nutshell, in the early 1990s, British citizens became customers.

This change was controversial and constituted an important point of conflict between the two main political parties of the country, the Conservative Party and the Labor Party, the latter historically with a center-right ideology. Specifically, the opposition considered that the Charters reduced the Government-citizen relationship to a mere commercial transaction.⁵

In 1994, the old antagonists of the Charters won the elections, and Tony Blair became the new occupant of 10 Downing Street. By then, there were in the country about 200 Charters at a national level, and approximately 10,000 Charters at a local level,⁶ and many of the ideas behind the Charters had obtained a wider approval, even from the Labor Party, now called "New Labour." The result was that the Charters not only survived the transition of government, but also acquired a new impetus under Blair, along with a new name, "Service First," which continues to be used at present. Blair also supported with renewed energy the system of awards granted to the Charters, known as Charter Mark. The Charter Mark Award has two innovations that merit being mentioned as tools for the Charters to accomplish their goal of improving the quality of service through improvements in the internal processes of the agency. First, the agency that submits its Charter to the annual competition has to go through an internal evaluation in accordance with the criteria and expectations stipulated by the Charter itself. Then, the award, when won, is only valid for a term of three years,

and after that it has to go through the same process of evaluation. This periodic reevaluation of the agency ensures a permanent updating of the processes and products in relation to the expectations stipulated in the Charter. Finally, since the information about the candidates to the award is made public, losing is as shameful as winning is prestigious.⁷ Therefore, the legitimacy of the government agencies is on the one hand evaluated positively in terms of obtaining the Charter Mark, and on the other hand negatively for not having obtained it and, even worse, for having lost it. This is why the percentage of agencies that comply with the requirements to win the award has been climbing steadily. For example, in 1999 it was 68%; while in 2001 it had gone up to 85%.⁸

To summarize the pioneer experience of Great Britain, the Charters became institutionalized in the system of Government of the country when they were accepted by a high percentage of not only national governments, but also local, in part thanks to the innovative use of the Charter Mark as a tool for a permanent self-evaluation to internalize many of the changes in processes implicit in the Charters.

SOUTH AFRICA: The Charter Can't be Mere Words

On May 27 2004, the Minister of Public Service, Mrs. Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, announced to the South African Parliament a new attempt to reinstate the *Batho Pele* Charter, or People First, that in its first two years of existence had managed to “belong to few and be ignored by many.”⁹

What happened?

The *Batho Pele* was formalized in May of 2002 by the South African President Thabo Mbeki in its Annual Speech to the Nation as a “call for unification” under the effort to create a government focused on the people.¹⁰ The principles of the *Batho Pele* include the six of the English Charter (for a complete list see the English case), to which the following two were added: consultation with the citizenry, and access. The eight principles of the *Batho Pele* were widely broadcast among the public services. Also, the South African government established a system of Multi Purpose Community Centers, the MPCCs,¹¹ with the objective of taking government services to the level of the community in an integrated fashion.

However, the *Batho Pele* has not reached the goals made explicit in its principles. For example, according to Rhoda Kadalie, Director of the Impumelelo Government Innovation Program, “Even though the principles of the BP are spelled out in big Letters in all police stations, these stations continue to be notorious for their ill treatment of citizens.”¹² The words of the South African Charter were never accompanied by actions such as reengineering of processes or training of government officials to make their implementation possible.

Aside from the lack of action behind the scenes to empower the Charter, its implementation was also a victim of party politics. The MPCCs located in districts represented by the official party, the African National Congress (ANC),¹³ were given many more resources by the government than the MPCCs in places whose representatives were parties of the opposition.¹⁴ This discrepancy fed the perception that the MPCCs, and therefore the *Batho Pele*, were nothing more than a political tool of the ANC party, instead of an initiative for national reform.

Finally, the enormous challenge faced by the South African government in its attempt to restructure the government and simultaneously satisfy the great expectations accumulated after the fall of the *Apartheid* and the triumph of democracy for the first time in 1994¹⁵ is something that cannot be taken lightly.

In this second chance, and in accordance with the new plans made public in May 2004 to “revitalize” the “*Batbo Pele*,” the staff, the agency and the public will be educated for the change. There will be mandatory training for all public officials, as well as an explicit plan to integrate the Charter into the reengineering of processes, and there is a set objective of attaining transparency in the fight against corruption and inefficiency.

ARGENTINA: Making the Citizen Explicit in Citizen’s Charters

The Citizen’s Charter Program (*Carta Compromiso con el Ciudadano*) was established in Argentina by decree,¹⁶ and as one of the main thrusts of the reform that was part of the Program of Modernization of the State, submitted in July 2000.¹⁷

The Program has four main components:

1. Quality standards
2. Systems for informing the citizens
3. Means for consulting the citizens and for their participation
4. Monitoring and evaluation.

As of May 2003, 31 public institutions had committed themselves to participate in the Program, and 25 of them were implementing it.¹⁸

Citizen Participation and Feedback

The Argentine experience stands out for the explicit central role granted to the citizens through surveys, advisory groups, evaluations and other monitoring systems from the drafting to the implementation stages of the Charter. As part of the process, the Civil Society Unit was created in July 2002, sponsored by the Program, with the purpose of coordinating the efforts of public institutions and organizations of the civil society.¹⁹

An example of this participation is the Advisory Council of Consumers, an entity established in 1998 that was formed by associations of consumers and now serves as a mechanism for permanent consultation regarding the development and implementation of the Citizen’s Charter of the Secretariat for Advocacy of Competence, Deregulation and Defense of the Consumer.²⁰

Aside from training 1,300 public officials (a prerequisite for developing the internal capacity in public institutions, as is pointed out in other cases described in this paper), forty organizations of the civil society also have received training in the methodology for participating in the processes.²¹

Another mechanism that confirms the central role of citizens is the “Report Card,” developed through surveys, that rates the quality and performance of the Charters.²² The Program also has a clear Web site that all citizens can access.

UNITED STATES: "Customer Service" as a Driving Force for Restructuring and Integration, from Social Security to 311 Chicago

On September 11, 1993, Bill Clinton, then President of the United States, signed the order called “Setting Customer Service Standards.”²³ The Order stated that all executive departments and agencies shall take the following actions:

1. Identify the customers served by the agency
2. Survey customers
3. Post service standards
4. Benchmark customer service performance against the best in business
5. Survey front-line federal employees on barriers to, and ideas for, matching the best in business
6. Provide customers with choices in services
7. Make information and services easily accessible
8. Provide means to address customer complaints

In the United States, “Customer Service,” directly influenced by the then recent English experience,²⁴ was undertaken within the framework of the effort known as “Reinvention of Government,” headed by Vice-President Al Gore, and thus receiving high priority and leadership. Probably the most salient aspect of the American experience is the reengineering of processes together with the integration of systems of information and communication focused on the citizen-customer driven by this new concept of customer service

An outstanding example of the latter was the achievements of the Social Security Administration, the agency in charge of retirement pensions in the US. In 1991, the Social Security Administration had a single “800” number that received more calls than any other telephone number in the world: 56 million calls from citizens with questions or in need of services related to their retirement benefits.²⁵ In 1993, when the “Customer Service” program was launched, the problem of delays or busy signals was becoming severe, with 50 percent of the lines busy during peak hours.²⁶ Even though it faced a growing gap between demand (telephone calls) and its ability to satisfy it, the Social Security Administration agreed to make public explicit standards of service regarding waiting time and follow-up services (returning calls). The public pledge became a key element in reaching (in four years) their goal of a maximum waiting time of 5 minutes in 90 percent of the cases, an improvement of the 73.5 percent point reached in 1995.²⁷ To achieve an improvement of such magnitude, it was necessary to overcome difficult challenges, such as the reassignment of over 3,700 workers who were performing other duties within the agency to answer telephone calls during peak hours.²⁸ To reach this goal the agency not only had to retrain the workers, but also had to go through difficult negotiations with their unions. And after that it became necessary to change processes and develop new information systems.

In more recent years, the experience of the Social Security Administration gave great impetus to the concept of a single number, not only in the US, but also in other places. The best current example in the US is “Chicago 311,” a three digit telephone number through which all citizens can reach any city service with a single call and get assistance. For example, a man living in California was unable to get in touch with his older sister, an elderly lady who lived alone in Chicago. When he called 311, a special service agent for the elderly was sent to her residence. They were able to verify that the lady was well and immediately inform her brother. Behind this service, winner in 2002 of the “Innovations in American Government Award,” granted by Harvard University, are dozens of databases with common standards of information that enable access to the entire city through the 311 service.²⁹

PHILIPPINES: “i-Governance” and the Citizen’s Charter of Naga City

Naga City’s Citizen’s Charter operates within the framework of the “i-Governance” system, launched December, 15 2001 by its mayor, Jesse Robredo, together with Philippine President Gloria Arroyo. The four “I’s” of the i-Governance initiative are:

1. inclusivity;
2. information openness;
3. interactive engagement;
4. innovative management.

The “*nageña*,”³⁰ Citizen’s Charter, the first and still the only one³¹ in the Philippines, is conceived mainly as a tool to promote fairness, having “eliminated within the Government the mentality that ‘everything depends on who you know’ by standardizing the times for the delivery of services. For example, the time required to repair a street light is 24 hours, the same either for an executive or for a citizen who is poor.”³²

The diverse commitments stipulated in the Charter are known as Performance Pledges. The 140 services rendered by the Municipality are divided into 18 categories, each one with its own “pledge.” These “pledges” specify the steps to be followed, the periods of time to fulfill them, as well as all the necessary logistic information.

NetServ and the integration of electronic interactivity

Naga City’s Citizen’s Charter is delivered in two versions: a printed leaflet and online through the Web site³³ of the city. The printed version was sent to all the households in Naga, and the virtual version is also known as “NetServ.” The NetServ version also has maps that indicate the physical location of each service, as well as the different tools for getting directly in touch with municipal officials.

Aside from direct e-mail to all responsible persons, the city offers a service called “TextServe.” Through TextServe, citizens are able to get directly in touch with the persons in charge of the services through text messages³⁴ sent from their cell phones, with guaranteed replies within 24 hours. This service, launched in April 2003, is being used by many citizens to file complaints or advise officials about needed services.

The e-Government innovations linked to Naga City’s Citizen’s Charter within a clear framework of public policies of “i-Governance” have generated a great deal of international interest that, in turn, has resulted in several recognitions, including the UN’s Cybercity Award, Dubai’s Urban Management Award and the Ford Foundation’s Galing Pook Innovation Award.

SPAIN: The Adoption of Citizen’s Charters in Different Levels of Government

In the past 20 years, Spain has gone from being one of the most centralized countries in Europe to one of the most decentralized. At present, the country is formed by 17 Autonomous Communities that represent a great diversity of regions, some with distinct cultural and linguistic identities, such as Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia. If we exclude the centrally-managed system of pensions, the current budgets of the Communities exceed the budget of the national government³⁵.

Given this political and fiscal decentralization, it is not surprising to find that the development of the Service Charters has happened in multiple directions, and on the three main levels of government: at a national level (State), regional (Autonomous Community), and municipal. On each level, the legitimacy of the Charter clearly comes from the direct branch that initiated it, and not only from the national government.

At the level of the Central Government

In the General Administration of the State, in its Public Offices and Administrative Bodies, and in the Common Services of Social Security, the system of Service Charters was launched as a result of the Royal Decree 1259/1999, dated July 16, that regulates the Charters and the quality awards.³⁶ This action derives from Law 6/1997, regarding the Organization and Administrative Function of the Government in the context of a process of modernization of the State undertaken through most of the 1990s. The Charters are managed by the Ministry of Public Administrations.

As in many countries, all public entities are urged to develop and implement a Charter of Service. An example in the Spanish government is the Bureau of Land Registry of the Treasury Department, whose General Director publicly pledged the immediate delivery of Certificates of Land Registry in 90 percent of instances, and also guaranteed that if there is an error in the document, it will be reissued at no cost to the citizen. There is also a detailed process for filing complaints that includes a promise to reply to all complaints within 15 days.³⁷

At the level of the Autonomous Communities

Several of the Autonomous Communities have Charters, each one created, validated and implemented by its own government, and many of them are written in the local language and with variations in their names. For example, the Autonomous Community of Madrid launched its “Decalogue of Citizens’ Rights” by decree in March 1997 as a starting point of a quality project, while the Community of Valencia develops its Charters of Services through a decree issued in March 2001.

As in the examples cited from the United States, several of the Charters have an integrated telephone service – a single point of contact – for the citizens. The *Generalitat de Catalunya*, for example, offers the number 012, available 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year, accompanied by not only a Web site, but also cell phone interfaces, as well as an information service called “*ServiCaixa*” that can be accessed through the *Caixa*’s ATMs (the *Caixa* is the largest savings bank in the region). The Charter of Services corresponding to these information services assigns a maximum 20-second waiting time on the phone, and guarantee that users will not get a busy signal between 90 and 95 percent of the time, depending on the time of day, as well as a complaint rate of less than 1%.³⁸

At the Municipal Level

Many Spanish cities also have Charters. Barcelona’s City Hall, for example, offers as part of its Quality Plan a Charter of Service with the Catalan motto “*Els Parcs ara donen molt més*” (The parks now give a lot more), in which it pledges to clean the parks twice a day and disinfect them twice a year.³⁹

Spanish Charters of Service have evolved very independently from a legal and financial point of view. Nevertheless, there is cooperation and sharing of the best practices and standards among

representatives of different levels of government. In this sense, the Ministry of Public Administrations has provided technical support from Madrid to officials starting Charters for their cities and regions.

INDIA: The Role of Civil Society and the Charter of Mumbai

India adopted a model of Citizen's Charter similar in format and context to the British model, and informed the public about it nationally through its Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions. At present there are over 416 Charters⁴⁰ at the levels of Central and State Governments.⁴¹

The six principles of the Charter are identical to the British version (see the Great Britain case), but they start to acquire local character when they define themselves within three levels of quality of services.⁴²

1. **Must-be-quality:** Their absence dissatisfies, but their presence is not noticed.
2. **Satisfier:** Their absence dissatisfies, but their presence satisfies and is recognized.
3. **Delighter:** They fulfill latent, unexpressed needs, and surprise the citizen.

Praja and the role of civil society

The Mumbai (Bombay) experience stands out in India. As the major metropolis in the region, this city of 18 million and main center of Indian industry faces problems of poverty and informality. It is also one of the most polluted places in the world.

The Mumbai Citizen's Charter stands out for two reasons. First, the Charter was initiated by an NGO (Non-Government Organization) that closely cooperates with the government in its implementation. Second, the control system and the follow-up of citizens' grievances are implemented by means of monthly meetings backed by a database available online.

The latest annual report of the World Bank regarding India points out that it is "important that the Citizens' Charters be developed in direct consultation with social groups and that they are widely disseminated."⁴³ The experience of Mumbai seems to support this opinion. As of 1997 there was no effective Charter in this city, so the leaders of the Praja NGO, after learning about the experience of a Citizen's Charter in New Delhi, decided to submit a Charter developed by Praja to the high directives of Mumbai's Municipality. As a result of this submission, the Mumbai Charter was launched June 1999, with strong support of the Municipality.⁴⁴ The Charter has three components:

1. Information about each service
2. Pledges of quality and efficiency in their operation
3. Procedures for filing complaints

Once the Charter was created, Praja's main concern was to spread the news of its existence to users with different means of access to information. The Charter was published in the main newspaper of the city⁴⁵ and in the local yellow pages, and was posted on the Web sites of the Municipality⁴⁶ and of Praja¹. Another project included spreading leaflets and printed guides.

Nixel Grievance Management System Online⁴⁷

Mumbai's Charter has a three-level system for filing and handling grievances. On the first level the citizen submits its grievance. If the resolution is not favorable, the citizen's grievance goes through the following stages:

Stage 1: The grievance is directly submitted to the service provider shown in the Charter.

Stage 2: The grievance is submitted to a team corresponding to one of the six zones of the city. After that, each team informs the problems of its zone to the Deputy Commissary of the city.

Stage 3: Monthly reviews by the Praja-Municipality Group to identify chronic problems to be dealt with on a systemic level.

The grievances are filed either on a written form that is mailed to a traditional mailing address or on the Web site. All grievances are entered online and stored in a database, from where they are sent to the appropriate district representative for follow-up. The citizen receives an acknowledgement with a reference number. Thus, the Praja-Municipality teams have information at their fingertips to monitor the tendencies and flaws in the services, and the citizens have a means for following up their grievances.

FINDINGS

The seven cases discussed in the report provide valuable lessons about the experience of the Citizen's Charters:

- 1. Citizen's Charters are a means, not an end in the process of reform:** On the one hand, in its first stage the South African experience of *Batho Pele* teaches us that a Citizen's Charter that is just a statement, with no tangible actions of internal institutional change, does nothing more than raise the expectations of the people without creating the capacity to satisfy them.
- 2. Processes have to be reengineered:** Above all, the required "institutional internal changes" are based on orienting the processes toward the fulfillment of the pledges in the Charters. That implies overcoming the classic challenges of institutional inertia ("it has always functioned this way"), resistance to change ("it is not in my job description") and fear to assume risks ("I don't want to stick out my neck for this"). For example, when faced with a strong initial opposition, the US Social Security Administration managed to make changes in the jobs of 3,700 employees as a key element for reaching the goals published in its pledge of "Service First."
- 3. Users must be involved from the beginning of the processes of definition and implementation of the Charters:** All successful practices have incorporated "the voice of the customer" into their processes, either through a formal structure like Argentina's Society Unit, or through the surveys and extensive consultations used in Great Britain, or the direct official-citizens communications such as Naga City's NetServ in the Philippines, or the direct participation of Non-Government Organizations like Praja in India. Regardless of the employed combination of mechanisms, what is proposed and what is done will have neither relevance nor legitimacy if the end user is ignored.

4. **There should be a strategic use of IT and communication:** The most recent stage of the “information revolution” has given us better methods of standardization and other forms of integration of databases and communication systems. This enables us not only to automate existing processes to make them more efficient, but also helps us link communications among citizens, as in the Naga City case in relation to its Charter, or combine data from different sources to achieve a better control of communications and management, as is being done in the cities of Chicago and Mumbai.

5. **Training is key for developing internal and external capacity:** Another essential element for the implementation of the Charters is training, not only for technical skills such as customer service, but also for creating awareness about the Charters among public officials and users. The workshops that were part of Argentina’s Citizen’s Charter are a good example of training not only of public officials, but also of organizations of the civil society.

6. **The mechanisms of Awards, “Best Practices” and Grading are very effective to create incentives and to spread the Charts:** At a popular level, in England, the “Charter Mark” Award is a synonym of the Citizen’s Charter. The English Prime Minister presents the awards, which already symbolize a grading or validation of the Charters. In Argentina a lengthy document was published about the best practices of 2002. The document serves as a reference and a sort of benchmarking for others. In the US, Vice-President Gore initiated the Hammer Award. These mechanisms are also very useful as “events” to stimulate the mentioning of the Charters in the media, so they also serve as a marketing tool for the Charters and the values they represent.

7. **Sustain the Citizen’s Charters and help them survive the political ups and downs:** As we saw in Great Britain, the Charters not only survived the national and local changes of political parties, but even flourished (even though they did it with another name and with a different emphasis). The English persevered in promoting the program in various levels and types of governments—using many of the above-mentioned tools. It also managed to do it more or less independently of the ruling political party. On the other hand, in South Africa there were discrepancies in the degree of support that the *Batho Pele* received, depending on whether they were located in districts in favor of the governing political party or in areas where the opposition had prevailed, with clear negative consequences for the longevity of the initiative.

8. **Citizen’s Charters must be defined within a clearly determined framework of public policies:** The Charters are not implemented in a vacuum; to the contrary, they must be defined within a coherent framework of public policies. In the US it was done under the motto of “Reinvention of Government”, with a range of clearly defined objectives that gave a context and a frame of reference that were crucial for the focus on “Customer Service”.

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- ⁴⁰ *Citizen’s Charters*. Government of New Delhi. <http://www.ar.delhigovt.nic.in/citizen.html>. June 2004.
- ⁴¹ See Official Site of India’s Citizen’s Charter for a complete list of the Central Government’s Charters: <http://goicharters.nic.in/charter>
- ⁴² *Citizen-Centric Governance*. Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances. <http://goicharters.nic.in/chartermain.htm>. June 2004.
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- ⁴⁴ *In Service of India*. Indiamap. <http://www.indiamap.com/Development/praja3.htm>. June 2004.
- ⁴⁵ The Indian Express.
- ⁴⁶ http://www.mcgm.gov.in/Citizens's%20Charter/index_Frame.htm
- ⁴⁷ An Indian private IT company. See <http://www.nixel.com>.