Public Utility Services as Indices of Social Development

Anjori Sharma

Department of Sociology, Government Degree College, Dharampur, Solan, Himachal Pradesh, India

Abstract

The present paper highlights the accessibility, utility, reliability and satisfaction of public utility services like safe drinking water, health care, primary education, road transport and public distribution system from the point of view of the end users.

KEYWORDS: Social development, accessibility, utility, reliability, satisfaction.

Economic growth is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the development of any society. It is now well recognized that the non–economic parameters are of equal importance in developing human beings. As such, development cannot be conceived exclusively in terms of economic growth rather it needs to be viewed as "growth plus social change". The present paper highlights the issue of social development, particularly the extent to which it is directed at bridging social disparities, which are rooted in the public policy, which hinges to a large extent on the form content and delivery of basic public utility services like safe drinking water, health care, primary education, road transport and public distribution system. It is the contention of this paper that these are significant indicators of social development and change. Management and delivery of these basic public utility services with regard to their accessibility, reliability, utility and satisfaction in the eyes of the end users are important indicators and determinants of inclusive social development.

As we know that the term "development" has undergone a tremendous transformation in its conceptualization. There has been a shift from the economic growth as a sole indicator of development to quality of life or life chances index, to social development, to ethno-development, sustainable development and to human development. In short, social development has been understood as a process by which the members of society increase their personal and situational capabilities to mobilize and manage resources, to produce a sustainable and justly distributed improvement in the quality of life consistent with their aspirations. Development has been understood as one of the various activities of human beings which are closely associated with the existing environment (both physical and biological) and which is essential for the socio-cultural and economic upliftment of the people in a given society. The term also includes in its ambit human development, improvement in the life standards of the people, availability and rational utilization of physical resources of society. It also includes the development of infrastructures (e.g., human, social, physical and economic infrastructures), social justice, decentralized and good governance, institutionalization of democracy; proper improvement in health through better health care services, expansion of education, maintenance of social peace and law and order. It has been emphasized that given this multi-dimensionality of the concept of development, a holistic approach is required to comprehend and analyse it.

An essential concern of social development is to provide social justice and equitable distribution of the fruits of development. Its objective is to achieve a humanistic society with institutions and organizations that will respond more appropriately to human needs. Thus, there are too many things with which social development as a

concept is concerned. As such it is both, a normative and operational concept. The emphasis of this paradigm of social development is on people's participation including the role of self-help groups and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) emphasizing on the satisfaction of basic needs with a view to improving the quality of life. The important dimension of this model is the issue of "Good Governance" for an effective and efficient delivery of basic utility services like education, health care, safe drinking water, roads and transport and public distribution system. Thus, the emphasis has shifted now to the human development.

In the present study, social development has been viewed as the sum total of human development. Further, in this paradigm the aggregate human development index of a society or a country reflects the segregated index of development of individuals comprising it. Such a paradigm of social development envisages the empowerment of people for whom investment in public utility services like education, health, housing, food, water and transport are essential. Moreover, in this paradigm of social development, the delivery mechanism of various welfare services also becomes important and the state must ensure that the benefits of its welfare policies and programmes reach the disadvantaged groups for whom they are intended. In this sense, social development must aim at reducing wide disparities not only in the life-styles of people within the community but also in assets that they possess. Apart from the delivery mechanism, true social development must also devise ways and means to get feedback from the people to know the level of their satisfaction with various state sponsored welfare programmes. This will enable the state to have a reliable human balance sheet. In this conception of social development, the distribution of public social services becomes a key to harmonious, happy and creative life of the individuals.

Since independence the central and state governments in India have addressed themselves to provide these welfare services to the people. However, in recent years, urgent attention is being paid to the effective delivery of these services. It is amply reflected in the fact that there has been constant rise in the budgets of central and state governments to enhance the scope of these services as mentioned earlier. However, one is not sure whether and to what extent these services, reach of intended consequences? It is felt that in order to examine these questions in a scientific way, it is necessary to get the feedback about the adequacy or inadequacy of these services from the end users. Have the benefits of these services reached all the sections of society, particularly the weaker and disadvantaged groups? Along with it, it is also necessary to ascertain the level of satisfaction of the end users with these welfare services. Perhaps monitoring by the state agency alone may not be enough. It is with this objective that the present study is being undertaken. It is an attempt to see as to what extent these services have met the goals of social development. In fact, some attempts have been made earlier in this direction. As pointed out earlier a comprehensive study of this nature was conducted at a macro-level by a research group called "Public Affair Centre" with the help of grant from Ford Foundation (Paul, 2004).

The present study has applied the framework of above-mentioned study for a micro level analysis. It intends to assess the state of public services in a selected block of Hamirpur District in the state of Himachal Pradesh. It proposes to analyse users' perspective on five main basic services, namely drinking water, health care, primary education, road transport and public distribution system. Each of these services will

be assessed along four dimensions i.e., access to it, its use, its reliability and the user's satisfaction level with it. The data obtained from the field has been interpreted in order to understand the extent of success of these measures of social policy in achieving the goals of inclusive social development. In a larger sense, this study has tried to assess the relevance of public policy initiatives by examining the views of the end users. Our attempt in the present study has been to ascertain the extent to which the management and delivery of these public utility services is accessible, reliable, usable and satisfactory in the eyes of the end users. Instead of getting bogged down in the intricacies of the grand meta-theory of social development, the present study has taken a different route and addressed itself to micro-issues concerning the common people in the specific locale. This has been done by treating the parameters of education, health services and living standards of the people as important indicators and determinants of inclusive social development. The important dimension of this model is the issue of "good governance" for an effective and efficient delivery of basic public utility services.

Access refers to the proximity of service facility to the household or the user of the service. Government norms for access often tend to be based on population criteria. For example, the location of primary health centres is based mainly on the population norms. However, from the user perspective, it is the distance or nearness to the facility that matters the most.

Use of a service tells us whether a household utilizes a public service. In a monopoly situation, access and use may be identical. However, when other options are available, people may prefer to use facilities other than the ones provided by the government.

Reliability or quality is a more complex dimension of a service because of the problem of measurement. It refers to the features of a service that are not self-evident from physical good or bad infrastructure with which one is involved. The user of a service may find himself or herself unsatisfied with the process while interacting with the service provider. As such he or she ay attribute a low quality or a low reliability to that service.

Satisfaction refers to overall assessment of service by the user, based on his/her experience. It reflects the personal judgements of the users and can be measured only through information provided by them.

Keeping in view the nature of the research problem, the present study has focused on the following objectives:

1. To analyse the user's feedback on the accessibility, utility, reliability and satisfaction of five public utility services namely drinking water, health care, primary education, road transport and public distribution system.

2. To ascertain the user's responses with respect to the quality and quantity of these public utility services and their preferences for the same.

The selection of Himachal Pradesh as an area of the present study has been mainly guided by the fact that it has remained largely under-researched one. The research done so far in respect of evaluation of social development and the different basic public utility services in the state is scanty, sporadic and sketchy. Moreover, so far, no micro level study has been conducted independently relating to the availability and utilization of basic public utility services in the state.

Method

The sample for the present study has been drawn in stages. Himachal Pradesh comprises of 12 districts. At the first stage, Hamirpur district, which is smallest in terms of geographical area and highest in terms of density of population, sex ratio and literacy rate in the state, has been selected for the present study. At the next stage out of six Development Blocks, in this District, Nadaun Development Block has been selected. This block consists of largest population among all blocks of this district, it has highest number of Panchayats, and highest number of households. This is the main rationale for selecting Nadaun Development Block as an area for field study. Keeping in view the time constraints and the resources available at the disposal of the researcher, it was not possible to study the entire Nadaun Block. Hence, out of the total 58 Panchayats in this Block, only 10 percent panchayats, which comes to roughly six panchayats, have been selected randomly for the fieldwork. These panchayats are Jalari, Bhumpal, Saproh, Choru, Rail and Rangas. The total number of households in these Panchayats are 499, 298, 491, 432, 285 and 263 respectively which adds up to 2268 households. This constitutes the universe of the study. Out of these households, a sample of 15 percent households has been taken randomly. The sample is roughly proportionate to the total number of households in each of these six Panchayats, which comes to 340 households. This constitutes our sample of the study. Thus, the actual sample size of the study is 340 households.

In the present study, the head of the household has been the unit of our investigation. He/She has been interviewed to elicit the necessary information relating to public utility services which is the focus of this study. Being the head of the household, he/she is expected to be well informed about the various public utility services, which the state is providing and about the extent to which the family is availing these services.

The data for the present study has been collected from primary as well as secondary sources. The primary sources consisted mainly of interview schedule designed specifically for the purpose of eliciting information on different aspects of the research problem. To cover the specific dimensions relating to access, usage/preference, reliability and the level of satisfaction with regard to the quality and quantity of five basic public utility services have also been incorporated in the interview schedule. The level of social development in the sample of the study has also been ascertained after analysing the above indicators. Further, both close-ended and open-ended questions have been included in the interview schedule. To collect the data, the respondents were interviewed personally by the researcher to keep uniformity in the collection of data.

I have tried to analyse the accessibility, utility and preferences given by the respondents to all the five services. It is widely accepted that easy accessibility of all these services determines their larger usability. To verify this idea, respondents of the study were asked a few questions. Findings of the study suggest that regarding the accessibility of drinking water, it has been found that majority of the respondents enjoy its easy access. It is accessible within less than 100 meters in case of the public water supply. Findings with regard to utility suggest that majority of the respondents have the availability of safe drinking water from more than one source, meaning thereby that they are drawing water from several sources available. However, most of them rely on village bauri (step-well) and tap water. Regarding preference for source of drinking water, the data shows that majority of the respondents prefer and use the

water supplied by the government through public or private taps. Findings further indicate that according to majority of the respondents, water through taps is available for at least one or two hours every day.

With regard to the health services, it has been found that majority of the respondents do not suffer from any major health ailment; however, most of them do suffer from minor ailments. With regard to the accessibility of PHC, it has been found that health facilities are easily accessible to majority of the respondents. On the basis of the responses of the respondents on the utility and preference for government or private health institutions, it has been found that majority of the respondents go to government health centres for minor as well as for major ailments. Another important inference that emerged from the analysis is that higher percentage of respondents prefer government health institutions for major ailments more than for minor ailments, meaning thereby that their preference for private health centres in case of major ailments is quite low as compared to minor ailments. With regard to the payment made for the treatment, it has also been discovered that majority of the respondents paid for the treatment and the payment was subsidized. It is also worth highlighting that people did not pay any additional money or bribe to get medical treatment.

On the availability of government and government-aided primary and middle school in the area of the study, it has been found that though private schools are present in the universe of the study but they are not as widespread as the former. About the distance at which the schools are located, it has been found that private primary and middle schools are not as easily accessible as the government schools. Responses on the utility/preference of school, indicate that majority of the respondents prefer government schools for the education of their wards.

Based on the finding regarding road transport our findings suggest that all-weather roads are available in the area of study and most of these roads are metalled. About accessibility of roads, it has been found that for majority of the respondents the distance of road from their residence is in the range of less than 1 kilometre to 3 kilometres. Findings further suggest that majority of the respondents prefer private buses to government buses because according to them these buses are more efficient and their condition is better than the government buses. Moreover, the commuters negotiate about the fare with the conductor of private buses, which is not possible in the case of government buses. In addition to these findings, it has also been discovered that the private buses provide a convenient pick up and deboard facility. Further the respondents have also indicated that transport facility has saved their travelling time.

Regarding the findings on public distribution system, the findings show that facility of fair price depot is easily accessible to most of the respondents of the study. The responses on usability and preference suggest that a large majority of the respondents of the study possess ration cards of the depot and which they visit every month. Both findings indicate that there is great utility/usability and preference for the fair price shops. Most of the respondents agreed that PDS facility is very useful to them as not only money is saved because of it but also all the necessary items are available at one place.

All the findings collectively taken regarding accessibility, utility and preference suggest that all the five public utility services namely safe drinking water,

public health, primary education, road transport and public distribution system are easily accessible to most of the respondents of the study. Similar conclusions are reached regarding the usability/utility of all these services. Regarding the preference of services, findings suggest that except for the road transport service, the respondents of the study prefer the rest of the four public utility services provided by the government. For the road transport, they prefer the services of the private agencies, due to better condition of buses, more efficient service and lesser fare as stated by the respondents.

Further, an attempt has been made to find out as to how much dependable/reliable these services are to the respondents of the study? The respondents were asked to assess the overall effectiveness of all the five utility services. Findings about reliability of drinking water supply indicate that there is lack of reliability in the supply of safe drinking water in the area under study, since the breakdown in water supply is quite frequent and the repairs of the faults of such an essential service is done at a snail pace. Water through tankers is available to about forty percent respondents and that too in extreme summer season. About reliability of medical services, the study shows that there is reliability of medical services provided by the PHC. However, during emergencies respondents mostly depend upon private health centres. On primary education, we can say that there is a fair degree of reliability of education in the primary schools, as the parents of the students i.e., respondents of our study are satisfied with the behaviour of the teachers and they are also satisfied that the teachers of the schools are regular and punctual.

The findings on road transport suggest that though majority of the respondents feel that government run buses are reliable, but quite a few respondents do not feel so. With regard to the availability of bus service during rainy season/bad weather, the findings of the study suggest that frequency of government operated bus service remains the same during rainy season /bad weather. Overall, it can be said that government run buses are reliable according to the majority of the respondents.

Findings about the question on supply of items in the depot suggest that though majority of the respondents feel that there is regular supply of food items, still a significant number of respondents opine that the supply is irregular. Lack of efficiency of the concerned government has been stated as the main reason regarding the erratic supply mentioned by the respondents. The cent per cent respondents have stated that depot owner charges the same price as officially fixed and majority of the respondents have stated that only those items are entered in the ration card which are bought by the card holders, but a few respondents said that items that are not bought by them are also entered by the depot owner. All the findings with regard to reliability suggest that to some extent the public distribution system is quite reliable.

Along with the reliability of five public utility services, overall satisfaction with the quantity and quality of all these has also been assessed. Our findings about quality and quantity of drinking water indicate that a large number of respondents are satisfied with the quantity of drinking water made available to them. But a vast majority of them is not very satisfied with its quality. To ascertain the quality of water available through natural sources respondents were also asked to state weather the natural source of water which they use is covered or not? In response to this question majority of the respondents replied in affirmative. The study found that though most respondents are less satisfied with the quality of water available through taps and

hand pumps, yet they seem to be happy with the drinking water available in the natural sources.

With regard to the extent of satisfaction of people with the health care services provided by the government, findings indicate that vast majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with the behaviour of the doctors at the PHCs. There is only a small fraction of the respondents, who were either less satisfied or least satisfied. Similarly, the findings regarding the behaviour of the paramedical staff indicate that majority of the respondents have a favourable view in this regard. It is quite an encouraging sign about the relationship of the paramedical staff with the patients. In response to the question on satisfaction with the availability of medicines at the PHC, majority of the respondents have expressed satisfaction at the availability of medicines. An attempt was also made to ascertain from the respondents about the most common diseases for which they received treatment at the PHC. Findings in this regard indicate that mostly respondents suffer from cough, cold and stomach related problems and that very few people suffer from diabetes, heart problems and arthritis.

In order to know the level of satisfaction with regard to primary education, the respondents of the study were asked questions pertaining to their overall satisfaction with the quantity and quality of primary school education. Questions relating to adequacy of infrastructure, availability of teachers and availability of facility of toilets have been asked to know the quantitative satisfaction, while questions relating to children receiving good education/knowledge, leading to their overall personality development have been asked to know the level of satisfaction of the respondents with the quality of education. Findings with regard to quantitative aspect of primary education indicate that respondents are generally speaking satisfied with the availability of infrastructural facilities in the schools. Findings further indicate that mostly there are adequate number of teachers in the schools. A vast majority of the respondents have given affirmative reply on availability of separate toilets for boys and girls in schools however, there are still some schools where the facility of separate toilets for boys and girls does not exist. Based on the findings about satisfaction with the quantity of facilities available in schools we have come to the conclusion that most of the respondents of our study are satisfied with the availability of quantifiable basic assets required for good education.

To measure the level of satisfaction of the respondents on the qualitative aspects of education, a few questions were asked from them, like whether their children are getting adequate knowledge leading to all round development of children and whether the toilets are being properly maintained in the school. In response to the first question majority of the respondents replied in affirmative but there were some respondents who were not satisfied. In response to the second question on whether the teachers engage the students in extra and co-curricular activities or not, majority of the respondents stated that teachers do involve the students in extra and co-curricular activities. However overwhelming majority of the respondents is dissatisfied with the maintenance of toilets in the schools. On the basis of above stated questions aimed to assess the level of satisfaction with the quality and quantity of education imparted to the children of the respondents, it can be concluded that most of the respondents are satisfied with the overall development of their children and they agree that the children are getting adequate knowledge but, most of the respondents are not satisfied with the maintenance of toilets. For majority of the respondents, there are adequate number of teachers as well as classrooms in the schools of the area. Thus, we can sum

up by saying that the respondents of our study are satisfied with the quantitative aspects of the school education, but they are not fully satisfied with its qualitative aspects particularly about the toilets.

In an attempt to ascertain the views of the respondents of the study on quantitative aspect of road transport facility available, they were asked as to how much satisfied they are with the adequacy of buses available. In response to this question a large majority of the respondents replied in affirmative. Similar question to ascertain the quality of road transport facility, the respondents of the study were asked to state the extent of the level of satisfaction with the behaviour of drivers and conductors. In response to this question, majority of the respondents are satisfied with the quantity and quality of transport facility available to them. Finally, the respondents of the study were asked questions relating to the satisfaction level with the quantity as well as quality of items supplied in the ration depot. In response to both most of the respondents replied with affirmative.

Based on above stated findings, we can say that public utility services like education, road transport and PDS are reliable, whereas drinking water and health care are less reliable. Regarding the findings on the satisfaction level of the respondents with the quantity of the services, the findings suggest that except for health services respondents are satisfied with the quantity of all the other four services namely, drinking water, education, road transport and public distribution system. Regarding the quality of services, the findings suggest that the respondents are satisfied with the health care, road transport and PDS, but they are not fully satisfied with the quality of drinking water and to some extent the quality of primary education.

All the governments that have run the country so far have mainly targeted on providing the basic public utility services like drinking water, health, education, transportation, and basic food items at subsidized rates in close proximity of the population. Large amount of budget over the years has been invested in the infrastructural development related to such services. However, it is important that now the emphasis of the government should shift from rather than making public utility services accessible and available to making them more reliable and satisfactory.

Bibliography

Amin, Samir, (1976), Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formulation of Peripheral Capitalism, Hassocks, Harvester.

D'Souza, Victor. S (1986), "Social-Structural Constraints on Development" in S. L. Sharma (ed.), Development: Socio-Cultural Dimensions, Rawat Publications.

_____ (1989), "Economic Development, Social Structure and the Ideal Society" in P.N Pimpley, K.P Singh and A. Mahajan (eds.), Social Development: Processes and Consequences, Rawat Publications.

Devkota (2000) as quoted by Dahal, Ram Kumar, (2005) in "Development and rural development and rural development: concept and context". The Telegraph.

Dreze, Jean and Sen, Amartya (1995), India: Economic Development and social opportunities, Oxford University Press.

_____ (1999), Hunger and Public Action, Oxford University Press.

_____ (2002), India: Development and Participation, Oxford University Press.

Frank, Andre Gundre, (1967), Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America, Monthly Review Press.

_____, (1978), Dependent Accumulation and Underdevelopment, MacMillan.

_____, (1980), Crisis in World Economy, Holmes and Meier.

Gore, M.S. (1986). "Development Planning and the Cultural Context: The Indian Experience" in S.L Sharma (ed.), Development: Socio-Cultural Dimensions, Rawat Publications.

Government of Himachal Pradesh (2002). Human Development Report 2002. Shimla, H.P. Government.

Government of Himachal Pradesh (2002-03). Statistical Outline of Himachal Pradesh-2002-03. Shimla, Economic and Statistical Department.

Haq, Mahbub ul, (1996). Reflections on Human Development. New Delhi, Oxford University Press. Ltd.

Hoselitz, B., (1960), Sociological Aspects of Economic Growth, New York, Free Press.

Iyer, K. Gopal (1986), "Social Context of Development of Rural Poor" in S.L Sharma (ed.), Development: Socio-Cultural Dimensions. Jaipur, Rawat Publications.

Mehta, S.R. (1981). Social Development in Mauritius. New Delhi, Wiley Eastern Limited.

_____ (1984), Rural Development: Policies and Programmes. New Delhi, Sage Publication

_____, (1992). (ed.), Communication and Development: Issues and Perspectives, New Delhi, Wiley Eastern Ltd.

_____ (1997), "Backwardness and Civil Society" in S.R Mehta (ed.) Poverty, Population and Sustainable Development: Essays in Honour of Professor Victor D'Souza, Jaipur / New Delhi, Rawat Publications.

_____, (1999), Dynamics of Development: A Sociological Perspective. New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House.

Midgley, James (1995), Social Development: The Developmental Perspective in Social Welfare. London, Sage Publications.

Mooij, Jos E. (1994)," Public Distribution as Safety Net: Who is Saved? Economic and Political Weekly, 29 (3), pp.119-26.

Myrdal, Gunnar (1968), Asian Drama: An Enquiry into the Poverty of Nations, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.

_____ (1970), An Approach to the Asian Drama: Methodological and Theoretical. Vintage.

Paul, Samuel (1987), Community Participation in Development Projects: The World Bank Experience, Washington D.C., The World Bank.

_____ (2002) Holding the state on Account- Citizen Monitoring in Action. Bangalore, Books for change.

Paul, Samuel; Balakrishan, Suresh; Kumar, K. Gopa; Sekhar, Sita; and Vivekananda, M. (2004). "State of India's Public Services: Benchmarks for the States" Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXXIX, No.9, Feb.28.

Rostow, W.W., (1960), The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto, London.

Samuels, M. (1998), Towards Best Practices: An Evaluation of the First Two Years of Public Sector Benchmarking Project 1996-98. London, UK Cabinet Office (Office of Public Services).

Sharma, S.L. (ed.) (1986), Development: Socio-Cultural Dimensions. Jaipur, Rawat Publications.

_____, (1980), "Criteria of Social Development". Social Action. New Delhi, Indian Social Institute.