Open Government in Education: Learning from Social Audits in India

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Case Study for the IIEP-UNESCO Research Project
'Open Government in Education: Learning from Experience'

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Foreword

Open government emerged about a decade ago and has been gaining momentum over the past few years, likely as a result of recent advances in information technology. It is based on the assumption that the rapid development of new technologies combined with the pressure for more transparent and accountable governments will push countries to explore innovative approaches not only to share information with the public, but also to consult citizens and engage them in education service delivery. Moreover, by helping to redefine citizen-government boundaries, it is believed that open government can help improve transparency and accountability in the management of public sectors (including the education sector), and beyond that, the overall public administration culture.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines open government as the transparency of government actions, the accessibility of government services and information, and the responsiveness of government to new ideas, demands and needs. The Open Government Partnership identifies three major principles underlying this concept, namely: information transparency, public engagement, and accountability. The European Commission emphasises the principles of transparency, collaboration and participation, open data, open services, and open decisions. Finally, the World Bank defines open government using the principles of transparency, citizen engagement and participation, and responsiveness.

A cursory review suggests that there is a dearth of literature on open government in the education sector and a lack of systematic identification of practical experiences within this framework. Moreover, there is no uniformity among definitions of 'open government' in the education sector and an absence of clarity regarding the various domains of open government observed in the educational field. There is also a growing need to evaluate the impact of the increasing number of open government initiatives developed within the education sector around the world and to analyse and draw lessons from the challenges and barriers associated with their implementation in order to achieve their full potential.

The challenge for educational planners is huge – to pay due attention to open government concerns at each step at the policy and planning cycle. Each step allows for varying degrees of citizen input and participation: during the first stage citizens can help identify the problem and discuss possible policy options; then, during policy implementation, they can monitor whether the policy is being implemented as planned, detect weaknesses and shortcomings, and contribute to the identification of solutions. However, citizens can also contribute actively to the evaluation of education policies and programmes through social audits, thereby complementing other more formal systems of 'checks and balances to hold governments to account for their education commitments' (UIS, 2018).

In this context, the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) has decided to launch a new research project entitled 'Open government in education: Learning from experience' as part of its 2018-21 Medium-Term Strategy. Open government is understood here as the opening up of government data, processes, decisions, and control mechanisms to public involvement and scrutiny, with a view to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education. It calls for renewed government-citizen interaction and relies on the principles of transparency, citizen engagement, and participation, as well as government responsiveness. IIEP's project aims at promoting more responsive, effective, and innovative educational planning with a focus on citizen involvement. Its specific aims are as follows:

- to foster an understanding of what is meant by open government in the education sector;
- to explore perceptions of open government approaches in education among all major stakeholders;

- to establish a list of criteria that maximise the successful implementation of open government initiatives in education;

- to evaluate the impact of open government initiatives specifically as they relate to the aims set out in SDG 4; and

- to provide recommendations to education decision makers and planners on how to make informed decisions about the design and implementation of open government policies in education.

This research contends that all three principles of open government – transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement – are pivotal to achieving SDG 4. Through open school data, the public can verify that their governments spend money in a fair manner, which maximises opportunities for marginalised populations to access education. Open procurement can deepen the level of transparency and accountability in education contract management, thereby ensuring that procured items (e.g. school equipment, textbooks) actually reach their beneficiaries. Moreover, open policy and planning promote the involvement of minorities in the formulation of policy, which helps to make policies and curricula more diverse and inclusive. Lastly, social audits, like community monitoring, can be an effective means for verifying that school resources are being used correctly.

In 2018, IIEP undertook exploratory work to better formulate what is meant by open government in the education sector, and to document and assess early, innovative initiatives developed in that field. On this basis, the Institute launched in 2019 a global survey to review existing initiatives. It also launched seven case studies illustrating the diversity of open government initiatives in education. Each case prioritises one of the following aspects of open government: open policy, open budgeting, open contracting, social audits, and crowdsourcing. The cases combine the following data collection methods: gathering of contextual information using secondary data related to the programmes/initiatives under review; a qualitative inquiry with semi-structured interviews; focus group discussions; participatory observation; and a large-scale quantitative enquiry involving the distribution of 250 questionnaires to school stakeholders using a multi-level stratified sampling method.

This case study analyses the first social audit of education carried out in India, under the aegis of the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). It was conducted as a pilot project across ten states of India, based on the principle that citizens can act as effective monitors of their own entitlements. The study itself is part of a series of case studies commissioned by IIEP under its open government in education research, and as part of its global capacity-building programme on Ethics and Corruption in Education.

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Muriel Poisson

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Glossary

BEO	Block Education Officer
BM	block monitor
BRICS	Brazil Russia India China South Africa
CTS	Child Tracking Survey
DC	district coordinator
DISE	District Information System for Education
EO	Education Officer
MDM	mid-day meal
MGNREGA	Mahatama Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MHRD	Ministry of Human Resource Development
NAC	National Advisory Council
NCPCR	National Commission for Protection of Child Rights
NGO	non-governmental organization
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
PF	Panchayat facilitator
RTE	Right to Education
RTI	Right to Information
SARAL	Systematic Administrative Reforms for Achieving and Learning
SATS	Student Achievement Tracking System
SBM	school-based management
SC	scheduled caste
SCRP	School Complex Resource Person
SD	socially disadvantaged
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SDP	school development plan
SDM	Sub-District Magistrate
SDMC	school development management committee/school development and monitoring committee
SMC	school management committee
SMDC	school management and development committee
SSEF	School Standards and Evaluation Framework
ST	scheduled tribe
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
TLM	teaching-learning material
U-DISE	Unified District Information System for Education

U-DISE+	Unified District Information System on Education Plus
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
UT	Union Territory
VEC	village education committee
WAMGs	women's associations and monitoring groups
WS	weaker section

Executive summary

This study looks at the first social audit of education undertaken in India, under the aegis of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). It was conducted as a pilot project across ten states of India. Social auditing is a powerful method for increasing open government, which relies on citizens as the primary agents. It is built on the principle that information increases engagement of citizens and helps to establish their priorities. Based on this, citizens can act as effective monitors of their entitlements.

The study reviews two of the ten sites where social auditing has been implemented to learn from the different stakeholders what the achievements and challenges were. It argues that for such citizen-led monitoring to take place, tools and processes of engagement, as well as platforms for citizen-government interaction, are required. These are the elements that the social audit methodology strives to provide. In addition, as many communities may not be equipped to initiate and sustain such processes, a facilitating organization or agency is necessary, at least in the initial period, before social auditing can be institutionalized. In order to close the feedback loop, follow-up with the government is also essential.

The analysis underscores the importance of citizens having direct access to information and to platforms that allow them to dialogue with the State. It demonstrates that accountability can be established through such processes and that they can lead to empowerment of marginalised social groups, such as women. However, they require investment in time and resources to get started and then to keep on going. A commitment from government agencies to pursue strategies that facilitate access to information and citizen engagement, as well as provide follow-up are, therefore, the core requisites for a successful social audit. At the same time, a non-confrontational approach that favours building bridges and working collaboratively with government actors also plays an important role in making social audits work.

Introduction

India is a large and diverse country and part of a group of major emerging national economies that includes Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa. This group, known as the BRICS countries, are believed to have great potential not just for strengthening their own economies, but also for impacting the world economy. However, despite India's economic advancement, its social indicators are not nearly as favourable as those in other BRICS countries. They are, in fact, closer to those in the poorest parts of the world. In education, for instance, India is far from achieving the SDGs for most indicators. With less than universal literacy (74.4%) and having one of the largest numbers of out-of-school children (62 million), the country's capacity to sustain an emerging economy is in serious doubt.[1] Increasingly, governance issues have been cited as a major obstacle to progress, especially corruption and, related to it, lack of transparency and accountability. With rampant corruption, benefits not reaching the intended persons, and programme goals not being realised, it was becoming clear that the system of public service delivery needed a radical overhaul and reform.

In this context, civil society organizations, academics and researchers in India have debated different methods for measuring and improving transparency and accountability in development programmes meant for the poor. A great impetus has come from the Right to Information (RTI) movement that took root in Rajasthan in the late 1990s. It was a grassroots movement that made access to information the key for turning the balance of power in favour of people. Information would provide the lever for prying open opaque government systems and, shedding light on decisions around budget allocations, expenditures, benefits, and expected outcomes. Starting with budget details for programmes meant for them, the people of Rajasthan spearheaded the demand for legislation which would mandate government to make public all information related to a public purpose. Their efforts over several years led to Parliament's passage of the RTI Act in 2005. Widely regarded as one of the best freedom of information legislations in the world, it brought in its wake a new era of open government in India.

The passage of the RTI Act was followed by two other pieces of legislation concerning social and economic rights that strengthened the push towards rights-based development in India. These were the 2005 National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the 2009 Right to Education Act (RTE). Strong political leadership, which was open and keen to form synergistic relationships with civil society actors, also gave impetus. A National Advisory Council (NAC), led by Sonia Gandhi – leader of the Congress party in power at the time (2004-2014) – had included members who had led the RTI movement, the NREGA campaign and similar grassroots mobilisations. This Council was extremely powerful and managed in its first term (2004-2009) to oversee the drafting and passage of the RTI Act and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). The Right to Education Act (RTE), while not drafted by the NAC, was also one of the legislations supported by it and passed by Parliament in the same period (2009).

Concurrently, the concept of social auditing was making its appearance. The word 'audit' comes from the Latin word *audire*, i.e to hear or to check. A social audit therefore is a process by which a social group can hear or check the authenticity and veracity of a programme meant for them, and through the sharing of information and the creation of common platforms, make their voices heard. This form of 'direct auditing' not only increases the level of awareness about entitlements but also makes it possible for the beneficiaries (or entitlement holders) to demand greater accountability. Social audits typically involve looking at those areas of information that conventional audit mechanisms and agencies may not assess. This could include existing information

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[1] - The figures for out-of-school children range from 42 million to 60 million, depending on the source of data. The problem is complicated further by the fact that the definition for out-of-school children is highly contested. It refers to children who were never enrolled in school or have dropped out. But the definition for dropout is based on the number of days of consecutive absence and varies from state to state. Hence, in Karnataka it is 7 days of consecutive absence, whereas in Gujarat it is 90 days. Besides, irregular absence, a very common phenomenon in India, is absence not accounted for, even though a child may be absent for much longer than the 7 or 30 days mentioned in the definition. In essence, such children miss so much school that they should be counted as having dropped out.

accessed by the public and brought into the public domain, or new information collected from the people and made available for public scrutiny.

Social audits are based on the idea that people should have the right to participate in evaluating the implementation of programmes meant for them. To do so, access to information is a necessary but not sufficient condition. It takes the concept of open government beyond transparency to include mechanisms of accountability as well. While allowing for public verification of the official account of a programme, as presented in government data, social audits go a step further in assessing its usefulness to the intended beneficiaries and, based on that assessment, to seek reform. In this way, answerability to citizens and action in the favour of the rights holder are integral parts of the social auditing process.

Social audits in India acquired currency when they were used for assessing the performance of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 (now called the Mahatama Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, MGNREGA). Under this law, social audits became mandatory. The Operational Guidelines of the government define the social audit as:

> … an ongoing process through which the potential beneficiaries and other stakeholders of an activity or project are involved at every stage from the planning to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The process helps in ensuring that the activity or project is designed and implemented in a manner that is most suited to the prevailing (local) conditions, appropriately reflects the priorities and preferences of those affected by it, and most effectively serves public interest.

There can be no denying that without the National Advisory Council, these developments might not have been possible. The political climate and agenda of the first term of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) – a coalition government headed by the Congress Party – was a particularly fortuitous period for social and governance reforms. Unfortunately, it did not last. The NAC was disbanded during the government's second term (2009-2014) and the impetus given to open government reforms slowed down. Nonetheless, much was accomplished during that period and the formulation of a methodology for social audits in education was a major achievement.

1 ● Social audits in education

In order to introduce social audits into education, it was necessary to modify the process that had originated in MGNREGA so that the multiple layers and multitude of stakeholders involved in the delivery of education could be taken into account. For instance, under the MGNREGA, social audits concerned the provision of 100 days of unskilled work for a minimum wage. It was a simple transaction involving a limited set of stakeholders and provisions: the enrolment of workers on a roster, the allocation of work and payment of wages on time. Education, on the other hand, encompasses much more than providing the physical school structure or enrolling children in the school. Many other factors – including quality of teachers and teaching practices, curricula and textbooks, infrastructure facilities, participation of parents and communities and appropriate management systems of schools – all contribute to ensuring that educational goals are being met.

Another major difference between the MGNREGA social audits and the education social audit was that the former focused on financial corruption, while the latter did not. No doubt obtaining information on budget allocations and expenditures was part of the education social audit exercise, but the questions involving funds related more to misallocation and under-utilisation of funds than their misuse.

With the passage of the Right to Education Act in 2009, which followed a Constitutional amendment making elementary education a fundamental right in 2001, the potential of social audits in education assumed greater significance. This is because the delivery of education moved from being a government programme, with children as the beneficiaries, to being a right of every child, with the guarantees under the Act specifying their legal entitlements. Evaluating the delivery of school education was thus no longer about the performance of programme elements, but about children receiving their legal entitlements. Listening to their voices on whether they were, or not, receiving those entitlements therefore assumed greater importance. Social audits, which give a voice to the people, clearly had a role to play in school education.

The RTE Act also included a clause that separated the implementation and the monitoring of education delivery. In other words, it placed the responsibility for monitoring the RTE Act on the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, thus involving an agency other than the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), which was responsible for its implementation.[2] The NCPCR, like other national commissions in India, is a quasi-judicial body, accountable only to Parliament. Its powers include the right to ask for information from any government body, and to summon its officials. While it cannot give orders, it can make recommendations, which can then be presented in a court of law. As such, it carries a fair amount of authority and its members are typically drawn from a pool of independent experts, meant to ensure neutrality.

The separation of powers spelled out in Section 31 of the RTE Act states that the NCPCR will:

• Examine and review the safeguards for rights provided by or under this Act and recommend measures for their effective implementation;

• Inquire into complaints relating to a child's right to free and compulsory education;

• Take necessary steps as provided under sections 15 and 24 of the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights Act.

2- The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) was set up in March 2007 under the Commission for Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005 – an Act that was passed by the Indian Parliament in December 2005. The Commission's mandate is to ensure that all laws, policies, programmes, and administrative mechanisms are in consonance with the child rights perspective as enshrined in the Constitution of India and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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This section of the RTE Act created both an opportunity and a challenge for the NCPCR. An opportunity, as it opened the door for greater citizen participation and hence open government and accountability in education. But also a challenge as there were no precedents for such a process. The NCPCR had to develop an appropriate template for carrying out its mandate. Previously, the standard operating procedure for monitoring by the Commission had been to seek data from sub-national governments on performance of particular programmes. These included financial audit reports by the government as well as official data on school education. A synthesis of this data, supplemented with an overview of complaints received and addressed by the Commission, formed the bulk of the report submitted to Parliament. The RTE Division, newly established at the NCPCR for the purposes of monitoring the RTE Act, however, did not see this process as adequate.[3]

Instead, the RTE Division took the view that the most effective monitoring would be achieved through the direct involvement of people or rights holders. Towards this end, it initiated a pilot study that would put into place and test a methodology involving monitoring by the community. This methodology drew heavily from the social audits used for MGNREGA, but also differed substantially from them. The exercise of developing a methodology especially for social auditing of RTE was part of a pilot conducted by the RTE Division of the NCPCR in ten states across the country.[4]

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[3] The RTE Division was established in December 2009, and Kiran Bhatty was appointed to head it. She thus became the first National Commissioner for RTE, responsible for recruiting a team and designing its activities for the next three years. It was the conviction of Dr. Shantha Sinha, Chairperson of the NCPCR, and the members of the RTE Division that drove the RTE monitoring and implementation activities in that period. They pushed many boundaries as they strove to institutionalise greater transparency and citizen participation in RTE. The social audit experiment was one such effort.

[4] The ten states involved in the pilot exercise were Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. Barring Delhi and Karnataka, all other states selected rural districts for the social audit.

2 ● The social audit pilot study

2.1 Preparation

To transform the MGNREGA social audit format into a social audit of education or specifically, RTE, a series of consultations were undertaken by the NCPCR. The purpose of these consultations was to understand:

- Which level of government (central to local) was responsible for the delivery of which entitlement (e.g. toilets, free textbooks);
- What information was accessible at different levels of government;
- Which civil society actors/ NGOs were willing to engage with the social audit;
- How prepared were communities to participate in the exercise; and
- What tools were appropriate for conducting social audits in a systematic manner.

This was a difficult task on all accounts. While the RTE Act identified the entitlements, it did not set accountabilities for each of them. Further, it did not specify a grievance redress mechanism. Hence there was a need to provide communities with a means to systematically document and record their grievances for each violation of the Act.[5] The social audit methodology had to accommodate these new elements. It was also recognised that while the Right to Information (RTI) Act allowed for access to information, the NCPCR would need to assist in that process to save time. Finally, in each of the ten states, the Commission engaged a civil society group that had experience of working with the community at the grassroots level. Given the risk that the process of conducting a social audit might ruffle some administration feathers, only those groups having a good rapport with the government and/or were willing to stay the course in case of backlash were retained.

In the end, the mix of participating groups included those that worked directly with education, but also ones that were focused on such issues as child labour, human rights violations, youth and gender rights, which also impacted education, albeit tangentially. This diversity greatly added to the richness of the pilot project experience, as each group, while maintaining the focus on RTE, also highlighted their particular area of expertise and interest. Hence, all these issues linked to education – child labour, gender, Dalit[6] or tribal rights, other human rights violations – were represented in a special way. The mix also meant a larger cross-section of society was involved, as were different government departments, and it highlighted the multi-dimensional nature of ensuring children's right and access to education. For instance, the NGO in Tamil Nadu (one of the ten states in the pilot) was focused on human rights violations and therefore highlighted cases of violence and corporal punishment in schools. In some cases, the violence was so severe that the police had to intervene. In Andhra Pradesh, child labour issues required cooperation among the labour, women and child development agencies and the department of education.

The consultative process also identified a need to develop the following materials and tools:

- Awareness raising materials for the community;

5- Too often citizen grievances are presented in an anecdotal fashion and tend not be taken seriously by the authorities. Detailed and systematic documentation is more difficult to ignore.

6- Dalit refers to the caste that is considered lowest in the caste hierarchy. Considered 'untouchable' for centuries, discrimination against them persists to date.

- Tools for recording information from schools;
- Tools for recording information from households;
- Protocols for conducting public hearings and education dialogues;
- Protocols for follow up with the authorities;
- An accountability matrix;
- Grievance redressal guidelines.

For this purpose, a series of workshops was organized by the NCPCR. It brought together experts who had used social audits before, civil society actors working in education and other education experts, along with painters, puppeteers, theatre artists and other creative performers who could foster communication. These initiatives were then vetted by government officials sympathetic to the exercise, before being approved by the NCPCR.

2.2 Objectives

Social auditing denotes a process by which people/citizens/rights-holders are 'listened to'. This can include a range of practices involving citizen participation – from providing information to redressing grievances – and therefore does not necessitate a fixed methodology for its implementation. Yet, in the popular (and especially the government's) imagination, social audits have a specific connotation, involving accountability to the people in a public forum. As a result, social audits have acquired a somewhat 'bad reputation' in officialdom, for putting officials on the spot, by demanding answers and action. The NCPCR social audit involved the full range of auditing elements – making information available, providing answers and taking action. In so doing, it covered all the core aspects of public accountability,[7] not just the opening up of government information or decision-making processes, but accountability in the form of responsive action as well.

Thus the pilot programme's main objectives were to use social auditing as a means to test transparency and accountability in the education system as well as to enhance citizen participation in evaluating the effectiveness of legislation for, and by, the citizens themselves. It also sought to build platforms for seeking redress against violations of the RTE Act.

The pilot was built on the following general principles, which are central pillars of the social auditing education framework for education:

Keeping rights and the child at the centre

- Children's rights must be the focus of the social auditing exercise.

Transparency

- The community must have a clear understanding of the RTE Act and of the entitlements provided under the education programme.
- There must be transparency in how the community conducts the social auditing process.
- All findings of the social audit should be presented in their original form and with supporting evidence.
- All findings of the social audit should be made available in the public domain.

7- See, in Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability (2005) and Schedler (1999), in The Restraining State for a discussion of the conceptual frameworks of public accountability.

- It must be made clear that the community's role is to facilitate and aid the process of monitoring, not to act as inspectors.

Accountability

- Accountabilities should be fixed within the Department of Education for each entitlement of the RTE Act: who is responsible for its delivery and who is the supervisory officer responsible for ensuring that action is taken if a particular entitlement is not delivered.
- The type of action taken must be transparent and understood by the public.
- Time lines should be fixed for each entitlement, and any violation must be redressed within that time frame by the relevant authorities.
- Overall responsibility for action and ensuring redress on the social audit findings rests with the Department of Education, as it is the implementing agency for RTE Act.

Participation

- Participation must be encouraged from across all social and economic backgrounds, and everyone must be treated as equal: there should be zero-tolerance of discrimination based on caste, religion, occupation or gender.
- In particular, the participation of people from excluded and/or marginalised communities must be ensured.
- All stakeholders should be given an opportunity to express themselves to the social auditing facilitators.

Objectivity

- The social auditors must maintain objectivity and neutrality throughout the auditing process. No sides must be taken during the auditing process, nor should it be dictated by anyone's personal agenda or viewpoints.
- No special favour must be given or solicited from the teachers or any official or public representative who is connected with the delivery of education or the implementation of the RTE Act.
- No politicisation of the monitoring process must be allowed.
- Decisions to resolve irregularities in implementation reflected during the auditing process should be taken only after both sides are given a fair chance to present their perspectives.

Dialogue

- As far as possible, problems identified in the social audit should be resolved through a process of dialogue between the community and the administration.
- Platforms for dialogue should be established at different levels, in particular close to the people, to facilitate their participation.
- The dialogue process should be recorded and its proceedings formalised/ institutionalised.
- Action should be initiated on the basis of the dialogue findings and proposals.

2.3 Areas covered by the social audit pilot

In each state participating in the social auditing pilot, two districts were selected and then in each district five blocks and one Panchayat[8] in each block. All the government schools in the selected Panchayat were covered by the pilot study. The number of schools in a Panchayat varied from state to state. The idea was to cover the administrative unit of the Panchayat and get a spread across the district to capture variations. The city of Bangalore in Karnataka and Delhi – a city-state – were the only two urban locations chosen. All the others were rural.

2.4 Budget

The federal Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) in Delhi provided the budget for the pilot project, while the the NCPCR was funded by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and the RTE Division was given a separate budget from the MHRD.[9] The budgeting cycle in all of India is an annual process. Hence, every year the NCPCR has to present its Annual Work Plan and Budget to the Project Approval Board at the MHRD in order to receive funding. However, there is a pre-determined limit to the funds that can be received. This limit is decided by the Ministry of Finance and is extremely low. For the RTE Division, the overall annual budget was US$0.70 per school per annum. With 1.3 million schools across the country that amounts to US$ 0.91 million per annum. Since this was meant to cover *all* costs of running the RTE Division, the budget constraint was considerable. The amount allocated for the social audit pilot was thus minimal. As we will see later, this did turn out to be one of the biggest constraints faced by the social auditing exercise.

The pilot ran from 2011 to 2013/14 and the budget had to be requested every year – not an easy exercise because, despite support from the top rung of the MHRD, there were several naysayers who believed this to be an exercise beyond the remit of the NCPCR. As a result, after the first team that initiated the pilot study had departed from the NCPCR, the social audits were discontinued.

2.5 Training

In Maharshtra, the social auditing process took off in October 2011 with a training course that was organized by the NCPCR in Amravati district. Personnel from the civil society organizations participating in the social audit were given information about the social auditing process, the principles on which it was built, its main elements, the specific tools that were developed for it and the overall methodology for conducting social audits. In addition, practical training was provided through the demonstration of a small social audit close to the training site. The NGOs were also given an organizational structure for monitoring and supervising the audit at the district, block and Panchayat levels.[10] Another round of training was held in Kangra district of Himachal

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8- In India, government at the sub-national level is divided into three tiers, namely: districts, blocks and Panchayats. Not all administration matters are devolved to the lowest, i.e. Panchayat level. However, the 73rd amendment to the Constitution gave Panchayats power over education. Unfortunately, in practice, they have yet to develop capacities and control over many aspects of education delivery.

9- This was and continues to be a source of conflict and concern as the RTE Division falls in between the two stools of the two Ministries. Lack of convergence mechanisms have made it hard to coordinate and function effectively.

10- These are administrative units that govern the delivery of school education, in accordance with the three-tier system of governance in India. In theory, the responsibility for education has been devolved to the lowest tier of government – the Panchayats but, in practice, they do not have much power over resources or decision making. The RTE Act, however, has given them a large role – in implementation as well as in grievance redressal. Unfortunately, lack of convergence across government departments has meant that the Panchayats have not been provided with adequate resources or authority to fulfil the roles assigned them in the RTE Act.

Pradesh in the following year.[11] In addition, the NGOs conducted training sessions in their own states before starting the social auditing process.

2.6 Organizational structure

For each state and civil society group, the following structure was adopted:

- At the district level: 1 district coordinator (DC)
- At the block level: 1 block monitor (BM)
- At the Panchayat level: 1 Panchayat facilitator (PF)

Overall supervision at the state level was the responsibility of the NGO head, who gave feedback to the RTE Division at the NCPCR. Commission personnel also made regular visits to the states selected for the pilot and participated in some of the activities, such as the education dialogues and the public hearings.

2.7 Limitations

It is important to note that at the time the pilot study was conducted, only some aspects of school education could be addressed. For instance, some sensitive issues, like social exclusion, were left out. In India, social exclusion, based largely on caste and religion, is a highly complex process with deeply entrenched roots in the social fabric of the places where schools are located. Opening that Pandora's box ran the danger of derailing the whole social auditing initiative before it could take root. The mere idea of community stakeholders being given the power to audit, was already perceived as a threat to entrenched vested interests. Furthermore, since public schools are largely patronised by people from the lower end of the social and economic spectrum, giving that segment of society the power to speak about a government programme was itself a radical idea. Despite the reluctance to address social exclusion head on, such issues as corporal punishment, violence or other overt forms of discrimination and harm, that might well have roots in social discrimination, were included in the social auditing framework.

The social audit also did not address the nuances of quality involved in pedagogical practices. These require a more specialised approach and methodology, and it was felt that the community at large – parents and other community stakeholders – would not be well placed to assess them. Not yet, at least, although they would need to be addressed eventually. In the interim, however, other aspects of teacher behaviour and performance – such as absenteeism, drunkenness, non-teaching practices – were included. Also included were issues regarding sharing information about the curriculum and learning benchmarks. The latter enable parents to know how their child is performing in school.

11-The training was conducted at the Jagori ('awaken, women!') Centre in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh and included persons from Jagori. In this way Jagori volunteers were also trained in issues related to the RTE Act. The trainees would then lead and supervise the social audits in their respective states. Subsequent training was also conducted in each of the states for the state-level cadres.

3. Rationale and methodology for conducting research on social auditing

The rationale for conducting this research is to learn from the experience of social auditing in education. This case study highlights the following:

- The nature, extent and importance of citizen participation in education and the relevance of conducting social audits in achieving this objective;

- The responsiveness of the establishment – the State as well as the schools – to the demands of social auditing;

- The impact of the different elements of social auditing on the community, the administrative process and the school;

- The changes required in the methodology of social audits and the governance architecture to make them sustainable; and

- The extent to which any of the elements of social auditing have survived.

Unfortunately, the social audit exercise of the NCPCR did not receive support beyond the pilot phase, for reasons that are beyond the scope of this study. It suffices to say that it was a combination of a changing political environment and administrative backlash to the citizen empowerment that the initiative had spawned, that led to its demise. However, the seeds that were sown in the pilot period did give rise to lasting changes in the community and the governance structure. As the social audit was conducted in partnership with local civil society organizations, in some places these organizations have also tried on their own to keep up with the broad modalities of the social audit, though not exactly in the manner in which it was originally conceived. The modified or newer modalities are discussed in this study.

This research examines two of the ten sites where social audits were conducted under the aegis of the NCPCR, albeit *in retrospect*. These sites are Udaipur in Rajasthan – a largely rural area – and East Delhi in Delhi – a largely urban one. The experiences in both these places, while having elements in common, were vastly different, as we shall see.

3.1 Rajasthan

Rajasthan is the largest state in India, in terms of area, much of which is located in the Thar desert situated in the west of India. Population density is low and habitations tend to be scattered far apart. For this reason, many schools have very low enrolment (less than 50 students) and there are some habitations that have no access to schools. At the time of the social audit, the male literacy rate was 74.7% and female literacy rate was 44.5%.[12] The gender gap in literacy remains one of the largest in India, despite much civil society action, such as the movement supporting the RTI and MGNREGA Acts. Rajasthan is also the birthplace of the MGNREGA social audits. This proved both an advantage and a disadvantage in conducting social audits of education: an advantage as NGOs were familiar with the concept, but a disadvantage as the administration was wary of it. The challenge was thus to find people within the bureaucracy who were sympathetic to the

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[12] Interestingly the male literacy rate has remained almost constant from 2001 (74.66%) to 2011 (74.74%). Female literacy on the other hand increased from 44.5% to 48.5% in the same period.

idea and convince those who were not. In general, the difficult history of MGNREGA social audits worked against the social audit team.

As mentioned earlier, MGNREGA social audits were more often than not concerned with misuse or embezzlement of funds – an issue that is easily sensationalised, particularly by the media and that has a long-lasting impact on the credibility of the actors involved. It was the primary reason that social audits acquired a 'bad name' within the establishment. The possibility of bureaucrats and their political allies being publicly exposed in corruption scandals is clearly something they would want to avoid, even fight tooth and nail to oppose. Therefore, in education it was important to establish that the social audit was not a) about 'naming and shaming' personnel but about trying to find solutions collectively; and b) that issues impacting the functioning of government officials – frontline bureaucrats, teachers – were equally of concern in the social audit, as they had an impact on the functioning of schools and the delivery of education. Thus, late or non-payment of teachers' salaries, excessive legal entanglements of the frontline officials, or lack of resources to conduct basic tasks that impaired the functioning of the bureaucracy among a host of other constraints, were also included in the public hearings and education dialogues. These assurances went a long way in getting government officials on board. The complete absence of grievance redress platforms within the system as a whole also came to light in the social auditing process.

Udaipur district is situated towards the west of Rajasthan and it includes a fairly large rural as well as tribal population. The tribal population is particularly deprived socially and economically, and many families rely on seasonal migration to the neighbouring state of Gujarat for livelihood. This has a disruptive impact on children's education as they are pulled out of school for months at a time. In Udaipur, the NCPCR collaborated with ASTHA Sansthan (ASTHA) – a civil society organization that has been working in the area for the last 30 years and has a strong presence in the local community. ASTHA's work has spanned many interests including livelihood, forest rights, decentralisation, education, women's empowerment, tribal rights, and transparency and accountability in governance. It is an NGO of long standing and is well-respected within Rajasthan. Its cadres are drawn from the local community and thus have strong community ties. This local credibility has allowed the NGO to attract a large pool of volunteers as well.

3.2 Delhi

Delhi as a site for the social audit is different from Udaipur in many respects. It is a city state, entirely urban and also the national capital. Hence, in addition to having a state legislature, several aspects of Delhi's administration also fall under federal administration (like the police). Furthermore, being urban, the population is more diverse than say, in a village or a Panchayat in a rural setting. Typically, the households that send their children to government schools are located in shanties or other low-income housing scattered around middle-class dwellings. In many instances, these areas of Delhi provide labour to the middle-income families in the form of domestic help or other services, such as plumbers, electricians or gardeners. Most employment thus consists of jobs with daily wages – ranging from private to self-employed and, in some cases, the lower end of government services as well. Being daily wage earners, the livelihoods of these workers are precarious in a different way from those in rural areas. For one thing, it is extremely difficult for people to make time for community meetings. Participating in a meeting or in social auditing would mean having to let go of a day's wages – something they were reluctant to do, especially as the outcome was uncertain.

A community meeting (©CPR)

Also, in an urban setting, it is hard to delineate a 'community' in the standard sense of the term. The population even in one shanty typically consists of migrants from different states who do not share social or cultural ties. Only those who have been settled for longer periods develop affinities specific to their urban setting. Hence, community mobilisation has a different connotation in urban areas and the Delhi example brought that to the fore. Interestingly, the Joint Operation for Social Help (JOSH) was able to reach out to a different type of community– that of women. They were able to devote more time and quickly understood the value of the exercise not just for their children, but also for themselves, as we shall see in later sections. This was one of the positive 'unintended consequences' of the Delhi experience.

East Delhi, the block of Delhi that was sampled for the social audit, is a socio-economically mixed area and consists of two types of settlements. The former, established in the 1980s, is comprised of what are known as 're-settlement colonies' made up of about 500 houses on 25-yard (about 23-metre) plots of land. These were provided to people who were moved in from various slum areas across the city. Over time however, in the interstices of these houses, newer migrants, largely Muslim and Dalit, established informal ghetto-like settlements as well. Children from both sets of dwellings attend government schools. However, their economic profiles are slightly different: women from the resettlement homes work in local factories (textile and packaging), whereas those from the ghettos work as domestic help in middle class homes. The men from resettlement homes work either in small businesses of their own (tiny grocery, tea shop) or in private enterprises and homes as sweeper, office boy, gardener; men from the ghettos work for daily wages or as domestic help, plumbers and electricians.

Although new to the education sector and younger, JOSH was the organization picked by the NCPCR for the social audit in Delhi. But what it lacked in experience was made up for in energy and a willingness to push the boundaries. Also, having worked closely with the MGNREGA, they were already familiar with social audits, and they had worked with young people on youth issues, which provided good preparation for education issues, as well as an enthusiastic cadre of volunteers.

Due to the fact that this case study explores a programme that is no longer in operation, it represents a departure from the other case studies for the research project 'Open Government in Education: Learning from Experience'. Consequently, these differences are reflected in the methodology employed here. The specific points of departure are discussed below.

3.3 Modifications in methodology due to the *post facto* nature of the study

1. In general, the study took a broader view of the term 'social audit', going beyond the fixed methodology used by the NCPCR for its social auditing. In other words, the study included all practices that involved at least some aspect of transparency and accountability to the people.

2. Participant observation of the original social audit was not possible. However, to the extent that some modified or reformed elements are still in use, these elements of participant observation have been integrated into the present report. For instance, in Delhi, the idea of an 'open day', when the school and its records are opened for review by parents and community members, was initiated as part of the NCPCR social audit, and still continues today. Similarly, in Rajasthan, using the Right to Information Act, a public portal was set up making all the information on schools and education available to the public. The use of the portal was observed. Also, while *Shiksha Samvads* (education dialogues), initiated by the NCPCR social audit, are no longer being held, SMC meetings have emerged as a form of open dialogue involving the parents and the school community.

3. None of the people originally involved in the social audit, especially those in official capacities, could be part of the respondent list, as they are no longer in these posts. The new ones were largely unaware of the programme, and their responses were necessarily limited to the surviving methodology and to the concept of open government in general.

4. The principle of random sampling could not be adhered to as the primary objective of the study was to learn from the experience of the social audit and so purposive sampling was used to ensure that those involved in the social audit are included.

3.4 Profile of informants

Table 1. Profile of informants

Centre	Rajasthan	Delhi
NCPCR: members of the RTE Team	ASTHA personnel and facilitators Parents Teachers and head teachers SMC members Education Department officials Local government (Panchayat) members	JOSH personnel and facilitators Parents Teachers and head teachers SMC members Education Department officials Community leaders

3.5 Structure of the report

The rest of this report is divided into six sections. The first section (Section 4) describes in detail the implementation framework of social audits. It includes the roles played by the two participating NGOs, the profiles of the personnel who took part in the social audit in each site, the tools that were used, and the procedures followed in conducting the social audit. The second section (Section 5) analyses the elements of the social auditing process, such as financial and technical feasibility, the capacities that existed, were built and mobilized through the social audit, as well as the operationalisation of the different parts of the process. These include: accessing information, communicating with the community and officials, and the forms of collaboration that were relied on. In particular, it discusses some of the issues concerning trust and mistrust that surrounded social auditing and how they were dealt with in each of the two sites under study. Section 6 deals with the perspective of stakeholders, i.e, the community, the schoolteachers, the education officials and the social auditing team, on the overall social auditing process. Section 7 focuses on the impact of the social audit. In particular, it looks at issues of transparency, accountability, empowerment of women, and tangible outcomes that resulted from the social audit. Section 8 discusses some of the conditions that contributed to the success and failure of the exercise. This section brings out important aspects of social auditing that go beyond its operational elements. It highlights issues such as the need to bring stakeholders together, especially those in an official capacity, including teachers, stressing the importance of taking a collaborative rather than a confrontational approach. It also provides a word of caution – anticipating some backlash from the establishment –- and hence the need to be able to withstand pressure. Local groups/ NGOs that do not believe they can stand up to some pressure may find it difficult to follow through with the whole process. The final section (Section 9) makes some concluding remarks and recommendations for social auditing, based on lessons learned from this experience.

4 Implementation framework of social audits

After the training conducted by the NCPCR was over, the NGOs began preparations to initiate the social auditing process in their respective states. The two NGOs adopted different strategies appropriate for their contexts.

4.1 ASTHA

In Udaipur, after the training conducted by the NCPCR in Himachal Pradesh, participants from the ten participating states came together for an internal meeting organized by ASTHA, where they made detailed field plans for each of the blocks selected for the case study. They took the decision to appoint one person from ASTHA as the project coordinator, who would hold monthly meetings with all five block monitors and quarterly meetings with the Panchayat facilitators. Similar meetings were conducted in all the blocks by the block monitors (BM) for training the Panchayat facilitators (PF). The block monitors also made road maps, monthly agendas, and awareness raising materials for the Panchayat facilitators (PFs). ASTHA then held an introductory meeting with the District Education Officer of Udaipur district and the Chief Executive Officer[13] and requested an orientation session with all concerned officials in order to familiarise them with the social audit exercise, as well as with ASTHA's role in it. This meeting helped ASTHA gain co-operation from officials in the field. It also greatly facilitated the NGO's access to schools and helped them set up meetings with other officials. Later ASTHA conducted a training course for its selected personnel in Udaipur. This was a sort of mock social audit to initiate the social audit team into the process, and prepare them for what they might encounter. It allowed them to make modifications for the final social audit process, based on local contextual factors.

4.2 JOSH

After the enactment of the RTE Act, JOSH had conducted a survey to gauge the condition of schools, as their work with young people in the community involved linking them with schools. It was these youth groups which conducted the situation analysis survey of schools and their readiness for complying with the RTE Act. From this basic survey the idea of social auditing was introduced by JOSH to its cadres. The concept immediately resonated with the organization having already worked on social audits with NREGA and they were excited about the project.

13-The Chief Executive Officer is in charge of education at the Panchayat level.

4.3 Profiles of the social audit field staff

Rajasthan: tailors, carpenters, accountants and the ward panch[14]

One of the interesting aspects of the social audit in Rajasthan is the wide spectrum of participants from the community, suggesting a great interest in education. For instance, one of the block monitors had previously been a member of the Panchayat and had also worked with an NGO on water and sanitation issues. Currently he is a Panchayat Samiti (committee) member. Interestingly, in his free time he still works as a tailor. Another Panchayat facilitator, who had been associated with ASTHA for more than 12 years, works as a carpenter.

In another block, most of the Panchayat facilitators were previously teachers in 'bridge courses'[15] run by AST-HA, and were therefore already familiar with the school environment and teachers. Since the NCPCR's withdrawal from the social audit pilot project, the block monitor now works as a teacher in a school in the same block. In another block, two of the facilitators had been involved in the Naandi Foundation's 'Nanhi Kali' (education for underprivileged girls) project, which runs schools for children in classes 1–5. Their work in this project gave the facilitators familiarity with teaching, especially with the pedagogical aspects of primary education. The block monitor of the fourth block is a long-time associate of ASTHA and has worked on several campaigns related to forest rights and tribal welfare.

The district coordinator was selected from among existing ASTHA personnel. While he had been a teacher previously, he was trained and worked as an accountant before taking on the role of DC.

Delhi: Women and community youth

The Delhi team coordinated by JOSH consisted of three sets of people: (i) women from the community, whose children attended government schools and who wanted to be a part of the social audit exercise as Panchayat facilitators; ii) block monitors who had worked with social audits earlier and had previous experience of working in NGOs; and iii) youth volunteers who were engaged largely for the mobilisation and use of cultural platforms to get communities to discuss the RTE Act and its ramifications. Compared with the Rajasthan team, the Delhi team was relatively young and new to education. It was willing to try something new – like social audits in education – which many other, more experienced, civil society groups working in education were not.

4.4 Instruments used in social audits

Awareness raising and community mobilisation

Several methods of raising awareness were employed in the two sites, using local language, idioms and forms of expression. But the main form adopted was community meetings. In some states, street theatre, puppetry and songs were also made and performed in village squares and schools. In fact, much creativity went into the awareness raising element of social auditing, which proved very effective for eliciting interest among people and creating a consensus for social audits.

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14 A Panchayat is divided into wards, a ward 'panch' refers to the representative of the ward. He or she is thus a member of the Panchayat.
15 'Bridge courses' refer to programmes run by schools to bring dropped out or out-of-school children back to school. They allow the children to bridge the gap in their schooling and enter the mainstream again.

Making puppets to be used as tools for communication and artists from Delhi
conveying messages on the Right to Education Act 2009 (©CPR)

In Rajasthan, newsletters and leaflets were developed and distributed in the community but also in schools and government offices, providing information about the RTE Act as well as the impending social audit. Children were given leaflets in schools to distribute to parents and other community members. In addition, cycle rallies were held, as were parent meetings. The impact of these campaigns was that people came to the public hearing and later to education dialogues.

The community meetings were conducted not too far from habitats,[16] taking into account people's time constraints and availability. Meeting times were often fixed at the same time Panchayat facilitators were conducting their household surveys. The number of participants ranged from 10 to 50 people. Typically, the facilitators began by reading the RTE Act and explaining some of its clauses. Initially discussion was general and mainly revolved around the Act and its no-detention clause[17], which the community was not happy about. Out-of-school children, mid-day meals and school management committees, were other issues of concern. The facilitators asked people to submit complaints related to schools, talked about the social audit process, and motivated them to send their children to school. In one of the Panchayats, ASTHA worked with a women's group (*Adivasi Mahil Jagriti Samiti)* that increased women's participation in the social audit in that area. While a minimum of two meetings were organized in each village, there were also impromptu meetings when special issues arose.

JOSH started their social audit exercise with a public hearing. They believed that this would generate interest in the community and bring people on board the social audit initiative. The public hearing, with the NCPCR dramatically summoning education officials and holding them accountable, appealed to a community inclined to be skeptical. As a result, they cooperated with JOSH in listing cases of violations. Eventually 809 cases were filed with the NCPCR for the public hearing. The NCPCR provided much support through this process, ensuring that each case had all the required details so that it could be properly taken up with the officials concerned.

16-Habitat, here refers to a cluster of homes within a village that may be segregated on the basis of a natural boundary – like a water body, a cluster of fields, or a main road. Most often, however, habitats also mark caste boundaries. Hence, people of the same caste will have homes close to each other. Only rarely are they interspersed with homes from different castes. However, the segregation is largely between the scheduled caste (the lowest in the hierarchy) and other castes, and not so much across the rest of the castes.

17-The no-detention clause refers to Clause 16 of Chapter 5 of the RTE Act that states: 'that no child admitted in a school shall be held back in class or expelled from school till the completion of elementary education'.

Box 1. Complaints received during the Delhi public hearing (20 April 2011)

- None of the schools had specified timetables for any of the classes, in other words, indicating which subject would be taught, when in the day or week, for how long, and by whom. Classes were being held entirely arbitrarily.

- Teachers routinely came late; in many cases it was reported that teachers would appoint students as 'class monitors' and leave without teaching.

- There were no individual progress reports for the children, and hence no use of the comprehensive evaluation system mandated by the RTE Act.

- No extra-curricular activities were taking place, like music or sports. There were also no libraries in the schools. While books could be found, there was no system for issuing them.

- Most schools reported inadequate separate toilets for girls and boys.

- Unhygienic water supply was also a common complaint.

- Limited support staff, including for cleaning, was reported by teachers as a constraint.

- Parents said they were not informed about PTA meetings and many had never been to any of them.

- No records were available for inspection.

- A liquor shop located next to a school was identified as a safety hazard.

This Delhi hearing was the second public hearing held by the NCPCR. The first one took place at Alwar (Rajasthan), and was attended by the founders of JOSH, who were sufficiently impressed to organize a public hearing in Delhi. After Alwar, JOSH had internal discussions and decided they would hold the PH at the field site itself,[18] as this would ensure greater participation by the community and let people see what was on offer, especially that 'government would come to the people.' The NCPCR backed this initiative, and preparations and mobilisation in the community began. There was much at stake for JOSH.

- Volunteers made daily visits to households to inform parents about the RTE Act and the potential of the public hearing to address their concerns about schooling. They also used street plays and songs to draw people together and get the message across. The community responded very positively. It was the first time that so much energy was being put into getting them to participate collectively in the education of their children and school life. While in the past they had to make endless trips to government offices with their petitions and requests for improvement in schools, this was the first time people were coming to them asking what their grievances were. There was much built-up frustration and dissatisfaction with the school and no one from the establishment, including politicians, had taken any interest. Getting an opportunity to present their side of the story directly to officials was very appealing. The idea of finally getting a 'hearing' elicited a huge response. The impact of this public hearing is described in later sections.

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18 Usually, a public hall is hired for the purpose of the hearing, and community members – largely the complainants – are ferried to the venue. This was the first time that it was held in an open space close to habitations. It allowed a larger group of people to witness the proceedings.

A villager sharing his grievances about the village school (©CPR)

4.5 Baseline survey and information gathering

This process involved school and household visits and consisted of the following steps:

- Listing of issues to be monitored: An initial list was drawn up, corresponding to the entitlements under the RTE Act and based on what the community considered a priority area. In subsequent rounds of auditing, the list went through changes as new issues were raised.

- Collecting information: Acquiring all relevant information from public agencies in the form of documents and official records, relating to issues identified by the community. For instance, if there was no functioning toilet in the school, was a budget set aside for one, and did the records show expenditure? Was the toilet installed but not functional, or not even installed? This part of the exercise involved an extensive use of the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

- Collating and simplifying information: This was an extremely important part of the social auditing process, where complex official documents and records were demystified, simplified and summarised so that a lay person could comprehend this information, as well as respond to it.

- Baseline school and household survey: The next step was to do a baseline survey of the identified issues concerning the school and verifying the information with children, parents and other community members. This also included a household survey.

Being supported by the community and teachers opened the way to conducting a baseline survey of schooling conditions. It was important to gather information in a survey format as it made the findings rigourous and harder for the establishment to challenge or brush aside. Too often communities and civil society groups present their grievances as anecdotes, often without details and almost always not in writing. In this form they are easily forgotten. But when backed up with detailed documentation of the problems, grievances have a powerful

impact. In addition to the survey, details were also collected from the children, parents and other community members so as to verify accounts.

A children's meeting (©CPR)

School visits by the Panchayat facilitators involved meeting the head teacher first and introducing themselves and the social audit pilot team. They all reported being able to enter schools and being received well, although in some places, they were asked to present the NCPCR letter of introduction before being granted access. On the whole, teachers were cooperative. However, the facilitators were not able to visit the schools more than twice a week during the social audit phase.

The Panchayat facilitators viewed filling out the survey questionnaires for collecting baseline information as one of their main tasks during the school visits. The surveys were designed for collecting information about the school – its infrastructure, teacher appointments and vacancies, hours of teaching and other aspects of school life – so that this information could be checked against the norms specified in the RTE Act. The questionnaires were fairly detailed and while they allowed the facilitators to gather important information, they also took a fair amount of time to fill out. For this reason, the facilitators tended to accomplish this task alone and not with other community members or parents. In the process of filling out the questionnaires, they spoke to teachers and children, but also relied on their own observations. The surveys were then passed on to the block monitors to collate. Some Panchayat facilitators waited outside the school a little before it opened to check if teachers were arriving on time. On some occasions, the facilitators would go to households and ask children about the regularity of teachers' attendance. In general, they admitted that the situation in the schools was not good: teachers were irregular and not on time; records were not updated; cleanliness was not maintained; toilets did not function; attendance of children was low; mid-day meal quality was poor. School management committees had not been established following proper procedures, and regular meetings were not held. Many SMC members were not even aware that they had been selected. No school development plan (SDP) had been prepared. In fact, the SMC members did not even know about the SDP. More important, they said that the teachers admitted that the community never complained and so, until the social audit began, the teachers had no reason to fear being monitored. The social audit team also spoke to children using playful methods. Those who had been teachers, were good at interacting with children. In general, the facilitators said that talking to children was an important part of the school visits everywhere.

4.6 Verifying information

Verifying information is the crux of a social audit exercise, as is gaining a complete and authentic picture of the situation on the ground. Wide dissemination of information is an essential pre-condition to this step.

While the household visits were primarily meant to count and take stock of children who had either never been enrolled, were irregularly attending school or were missing school for 15 days or more, they also turned out to be a productive way of having individual conversations with parents about the school. This helped start a process of engagement with the community and increased participation at community meetings held later. The facilitators brought the enrolment list from school and visited the households, gathering information and filling in the survey questionnaires. They also brought the Child Tracking Survey (CTS) from schools and compared it with the information they were collecting. The CTS is a survey of school-age children that teachers are mandated to conduct before the start of every school year, in order to ensure that every child is enrolled in a school. It involves teachers going house to house and enquiring about children and their school status based on their age. It is tedious work and often not conducted as carefully as required. Hence, finding discrepancies between the CTS and other surveys is not uncommon.

The household visits allowed the Panchayat facilitators to make personal contact with people and get a more accurate sense of the real situation regarding out-of-school children. Gaps between the CTS conducted by teachers and the survey done by ASTHA were identified and discussed with both the teachers and the community. In acknowledging the difference between responses of the two surveys, the teachers conceded that they did not collect detailed information. They also accepted that any child not attending school for more than two months should be considered an out-of-school child. This discussion provided a basis for interacting with teachers and getting them on board the social auditing process.

4.7 Eliciting government response: platforms for dialogue with the State

Once all the information has been collected and verified, it is then necessary to present any gaps to the administration so that steps may be taken towards bridging them. Without this, the entire social audit exercise would remain incomplete. For evoking government response, appropriate platforms for dialogue between the community and the administration need to be created so that local and speedy solutions may be found. Education dialogues and public hearings are examples of such platforms that were used throughout the social auditing process.

Education dialogues or *Shiksha Samvads*[19]

An important aspect of social audits is getting a response from the administration. In order to build that into the auditing process, education dialogues were developed as a platform for engagement between the administration and the people on issues related to the implementation of education and the RTE Act. The objective was to share information, review implementation of education programmes, and find solutions. The platform functioned as a channel that helped the administration to keep abreast of implementation on the ground and allowed civil society groups to bring issues to the fore and seek speedy redress. Typically, held once a month at the block level, education dialogues followed, roughly, the following format:

19-*Shiksha Samvads* were initiated by the NCPCR in their pilot on community monitoring. The term literally translates, from Hindi, into 'education dialogues'.

- Sharing of information by community groups and people on, for example, findings of audits or surveys; whether government orders[20] have been received at the ground level or not; reports of action taken and follow up from previous education dialogues; new issues; new initiatives and new government orders.

- Open discussion on reports of action taken.

- Registration of complaints – presentation and discussion of serious complaints, and commitment to act by the administration.

- Presentation of good practices.

- Detailed review each month of a focus area.

High participation from civil society groups proved to be helpful in mobilising the community and also in following up on issues at the education dialogue. The presence of a core community-based group that provided continuity from month to month also helped. Systematic presentations by the community at the dialogues made a huge difference in eliciting response from the administration. The venue for the meeting and other logistical arrangements were made by the administration. When convened by the block development officer or the sub-district magistrate (SDM), the education dialogues allowed for inter-departmental participation as well. Given that typically several departments are involved in the delivery of entitlements, it is important to have this convergence. The monthly block-level dialogues were followed by quarterly district review meetings where an overall review was done and un-resolved issues taken up. Ideally, these should be convened by the district collector and attended by representatives of all line departments involved in school-related issues.

Public Hearings

Public hearings are a form of public accountability that have increasingly been used by civil society groups in India to hold public officials to account in a public forum. They involve presentation of grievances by citizens directly to an appointed panel of independent observers. In this case, the NCPCR adopted a process whereby the group or groups wanting to be heard had to submit their complaints prior to the public hearing. The complaints were received in pre-specified categories corresponding to the entitlements (or violations thereof) of the RTE Act. The NCPCR insisted on a rigourous documentation of the complaints and, to facilitate that process, provided a template to the groups. The template included details of the complainant/child (including parental information), the school and education authority involved, the dates or time frames of violation, information of prior attempts at registering a complaint and the results thereof, and any other relevant information. This information was collated by the NCPCR and provided to the panelists in advance of the hearing.

The panelists themselves were selected by the NCPCR and typically included educators, civil society activists and legal experts – most often a retired judge or other legal specialist was included. The information on complaints obtained from the groups was also shared with the relevant government authorities, who could submit their responses in writing, if they chose to do so. But in any event, they were also summoned to the hearing - the NCPCR being a quasi-judicial body has the power to issue summons to officials. Further, the date, time and venue of the hearing were publicly announced to facilitate community participation. The site of the hearing was chosen close to the area where the complaints arose – a neighborhood in an urban setting, or the closest block or district town in rural areas.

On the day of the hearing, after the panel and the public were assembled, each complaint was officially read out, the complainant asked to add to it or, as often happened, to be simply present (in a public forum it was often difficult for the complainants to be very forthcoming) and the relevant authorities were asked to respond. Based on the response, the panel was then asked to give their recommendations in terms of the action that was needed. If

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20 Government officials can issue directives – called 'government orders' (GOs) - for putting in place instructions they want followed. Often at lower levels of administration, no action is taken unless there is a GO specifying the instructions, even if there is a national law to that effect. For instance, even though the RTE Act states that no fees are to be imposed on students, schools will only comply once they have received a government order to that effect. Even other instructions, for example pertaining to mid-day meals or expenditure norms, have to be conveyed through GOs to be made implementable. Similarly, incentive schemes are also specified in GOs.

the authorities acknowledged their lapse and presented remedies in accordance with the law, their response was ratified and noted; if not, the panel recommended suitable remedies. In each case, care was taken to establish a time frame for the solution.

After the hearing, each of the solutions recommended was collated and sent by the NCPCR as an official notification to the relevant authorities for action. This notification was also shared with the group that organized the hearing so that they could present it to the complainants for follow-up.

Typically, the hearings were extremely emotionally charged and often hostile. The authorities resisted the summons, were defensive, often in denial of any wrong-doing and recalcitrant when it came to action. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, where many complaints relating to corporal punishment were presented, some even involving the death of children, the police commissioner who had been summoned refused to show herself in the public space. Instead, she asked for a private meeting with the chairperson of the NCPCR, outside the hearing. In some cases, there was political backlash as well. Teachers in India are a strong political lobby as they also serve as appointed election officers, and are therefore in charge of electoral rolls and polling booths. This gives them access to politicians and gives politicians access to their agency during elections. It is not a happy situation and one regularly exploited by teachers and politicians alike. In Delhi, for example, the Chief Minister of Delhi intervened forcefully to stall further public hearings. At any rate, all hearings were powerful, generated a great deal of interest, including in the media, and had an impact on the authorities. The simple act of being held publicly accountable, if even for a day, sent a strong message and empowered the people.

As a result, many groups chose to hold public hearings, even before starting the social auditing exercise as a means of raising awareness and generating support from the community. Both Delhi and Udaipur, the case studies examined below, held public hearings.

4.8 Follow-up: closing the feedback loop

Follow-up is a critical part of the social audit exercise, yet it is perhaps the hardest to implement. Very often, after presenting the information in a public platform – be it a public hearing, education dialogue or any other public platform – civil society groups find it difficult to follow up, even if they have been assured of a positive response. Many issues thus remain unresolved. It takes much time and persistence to ensure that action is taken. One way of doing this is to have a regular dialogue with the administration, such as holding monthly or quarterly education dialogues. Institutionalising the dialogue between the State and the citizens is thus an essential element of the social accountability process.

4.9 Concurrent and *post facto* social audits

Social audits can be conducted on a concurrent basis, i.e. at regular intervals throughout the year, or at the end of a programme cycle or year. The latter would be *post facto* social audits. Both concurrent and post facto audits could also be considered. In cases where both are held, the post facto exercise could act as a review, more than an audit. There are obvious advantages in holding concurrent audits because solutions and redress can be speedier. However, doing so involves having greater resources and capacities available at both state and civil society levels, and thus their frequency will vary. The methodologies vary to the extent that the information collected will not be the same. Other aspects of the process remain similar.

5 ● Analysis of social audits

5.1 Review of financial and technical resources invested

In retrospect, it would be fair to say that the pilot experience was a uniquely successful exercise that brought multiple actors together to achieve results in a relatively short span of time. It instilled confidence in both the community and the administration that transparency and accountability could be achieved through collective action. A fair part of this success is owed to backing by powerful structures like the NCPCR that invested a lot of technical and human resources, along with civil society actors. However, it was also an extremely time intensive exercise that was run with very little financial support and much goodwill. But in the end, it proved unsustainable in the tested format. At the time it was conducted, it was hoped that state governments, seeing the value of social audits, would want to own them and hence step forward to provide the financial as well as legislative support needed.[21] Unfortunately that did not happen for several reasons.

1. The NCPCR could not secure continued funding for the social audit at central level, as the Ministry of Human Resource Development did not view the social audits funded by them as anything more than a pilot project and wanted funding shifted to state governments. At the same time, however, social audits were becoming increasingly controversial with so much resistance from the state level establishment that it was difficult to push for their institutionalisation. Civil society action in education has been unable to counter this resistance.[22]

2. The initial team at the RTE Division at the NCPCR was disbanded. The new team did not see the value of social audits, preferring to revert to the earlier systems of relying on state government data for monitoring. Thus, the momentum generated by the initial team was lost.

3. Technical support from NGOs in the form of systematic documentation and follow-up, which required employing the structures set up by the NCPCR full time, could not be sustained due to the lack of funds. The importance of having a rigourous and systematic process came out sharply during the social auditing pilot project. It is necessary to institutionalise the process within the governance framework of the state, or to establish an independent structure supported by the state. This support must be continued for a few years (depending on the area) before the community can take over the process on its own or before the mandated structures of community participation, such as school management committees, can adopt similar processes. Wherever possible, some NGOS did try to pursue part of the activities on their own, or to integrate open government measures into existing practices. But, for the most part, social audits saw an early demise.

4. Non-governmental funding was hard to secure. In recent years, funding agencies have been keen to work with governments, not against them, and the social auditing exercise was unfortunately seen as belonging to the latter category. Even if that is not the case, funders were hesitant to come forward with support.

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21 - As happened in the case of MGNREAGA, where social audits were included in legislation and state social audit units were set up for conducting social audits on a regular basis.

22 - It is a somewhat curious fact that in India, while civil society has been very successful in addressing some areas, such as gender rights, hunger and livelihoods (including MGNREGA), education remains a neglected area. The reasons for this are too complex to get into here, but it remains a core reason that radical reform in education has not been possible.

5. The education sector has been focusing more and more on measurable learning outcomes, and social audits are not seen as contributing directly to that endeavour. Attributing improvements in learning outcomes to open government initiatives is difficult to do and certainly not possible within one academic calendar year or two. This constraint has severely impacted advocacy for open government reforms in education.

6. While governance is considered to be important, the discourse has moved towards bringing in non-government agencies or partners believed to have better governance structures, rather than fixing existing structures and systems within government. Related to this is that improving governance has focused on the perception of accountability as something punitive, and hence measures, such as performance pay for teachers or installing cctv surveillance cameras in classrooms (the latter even advocated as an open government concept), - are being seen as disciplinary measures.

5.2 Mobilising and building capacities

Due to the RTE Act, the NCPCR had an opportunity to mobilise different sections of the population (including experts) to build a new kind of monitoring system, involving direct participation by citizens. As mentioned earlier, since this was the first time a social auditing exercise was attempted in the education sector, all aspects of it had to be created from scratch. A consensus emerged on the need to develop a systematic methodology that could be adopted by the State apparatus and institutionalised. Hence a very detailed methodology with tools and protocols was designed for every step of the social audit. Experts from outside the education sector were also consulted.

The personnel involved in the social audit exercise stated that this was the first time they had received such training. It not only gave them an idea of how to do the monitoring but created a wider understanding of issues around education and the RTE Act. It increased their confidence in terms of making school visits, interacting with teachers and officials, holding community meetings and dealing with unforeseen situations and circumstances. This practical approach was thus a strong training component. They also found it useful that the trainers were themselves field workers, and hence their examples and experiences were real. Another valuable aspect of the training highlighted by the participants was their exposure to people and groups from different states who were working on similar issues. Interaction with them helped broaden the scope of their understanding and also helped establish a loose network among them.

In addition to the training they provided in Himachal Pradesh, ASTHA conducted something similar in Udaipur, but with an additional element, as pointed out by the project coordinator (PC). He said the mock social audit performed as part of training field visit proved useful for subsequent action. For instance, the quality of mid-day meals provided by the Nandi Foundation (a private provider) was found to be poor and this resulted in a 30% cut to its funding by the government. It also resulted in a government order stating that food could not be delivered to schools beyond a 15 km radius from its point of production. In this way, as the project coordinator observed, 'the training itself actively launched the monitoring process'.

However, the real capacity building took place within the participating NGOs and sections of the community. ASTHA felt that it had acquired a national image as a rights-based organization in education. Earlier ASTHA was known only in Rajasthan, but with the social audit it acquired recognition at national level. The confidence that the NGO gained provided energy to pursue new projects. The project coordinator also observed how he had enhanced and refined his skills through this work, and been able to expand to education his earlier experience with transparency and accountability in other sectors. The Panchayat facilitators, on the other hand, felt that the training did not equip them sufficiently in terms of how to approach officials, even if all the facilitators – except women – said that the training and the entire social auditing process had helped them gain confidence

in interacting with officials. But, as interaction with officials was limited to the block monitors and the district coordinators, the Panchayat facilitators did not get an opportunity to pursue the interaction on their own.

Other aspects of capacity building for the facilitatorss included gaining respect and recognition through this work and enhancing their standing in the village. One facilitator said: 'Now I can write any kind of application and people come to me to seek help in doing that.' Four others said that before getting involved in social auditing they were unable to talk in public or articulate their thoughts clearly. 'Initially I was hesitant to talk in front of the community, slowly that hesitation faded away and now I can hold as many community meetings you want me to.'

In the Delhi case, the participating NGO, JOSH, was present in the initial training sessions at Maharashtra with their youth volunteers who, despite being young, were very enthusiastic and eager to undertake the social audit. Other groups participating in the training were apprehensive about their ability to conduct the audit, but the NCPCR was supportive and agreed to give them the go-ahead. That boosted their enthusiasm to conduct the audits and allowed them to develop and follow a path they felt appropriate to the situation in Delhi. The tools acquired during the training also gave them the confidence to use these practical resources when conducting the audit.

5.3 Ways used to involve different stakeholders at each step of social auditing

Access to information

Despite the passage of the Right to Information Act, data are not readily or easily available in the public domain or to the people on the ground, i.e. parents, teachers or the community. There are several reasons for this.

1. The data regime in education leaves much to be desired. It is extremely centralised, poorly organized and managed, not available in real time, and inadequate in terms of the indicators on which national or even state level data are collected. For instance, data on teachers' salaries or the categories of their employment are simply not collected at any level.[23] In fact, the purpose for which data are collected in the education sector is unrelated to policy and planning. It is largely for inter-state comparisons on basic indicators such as enrolment, number of teachers, infrastructure (Bhatty, 2016).

2. Data management capacities do not exist at the local level. The largest official database on education – the District Information System for Education (DISE) – relies entirely on teachers and data entry operators (at district and block level) for data management. The teachers manually fill out the data entry forms and send them to the next level, where they are digitised by data entry operators, are not dedicated to data management, but work as administrative assistants at the district or block level. Hence, no analysis or use of data takes place at the lower levels.

3. The Right to Information (RTI) Act does mandate some information to be made available *suo moto*. While little of the information required is put in the public domain, there is some that is openly displayed. This might include, for instance, the weekly mid-day meal menu or the names of teachers employed in the school, or the different government schemes in operation – such as free uniforms, bicycles or textbooks for the socially or economically deprived. This information is written on the school walls or available on a notice board. However, it may not be regularly updated and reality may also deviate from what is shown, such as mid-day meals that rarely follow the menus indicated on the school walls.

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23 There is a very high level of contractualisation of teacher employment in India. This is not reflected in the data.

4. More importantly, there is a hesitation on the part of the officials to share data and information. The RTI Act makes it possible to ask for information, but it is not a simple task to extract it even after evoking the RTI Act. Officials employ every trick in the book to delay or give incomplete or inadequate data. It therefore takes a long time to obtain the requested information, with applications routinely going into appeal to the Information Commission. This requires not just time but also resources to follow up. However, during the period the social audit exercise was being conducted, the NCPCR was well placed to ask for information and obtain it. The civil society groups or parents on their own would not have been able to get it. Unfortunately, the situation has become worse now, with even the NCPCR not being fully functional anymore, or interested in a social audit exercise.

Delhi: Using the Right to Information Act and Open Day

JOSH had been very actively involved in the RTI movement and decided on their own to use this Act to seek information through an RTI application. After being refused by the schools, they put in an appeal[24] on 29 July, 2011 at the Central Information Commission and gained a hearing to which the NCPCR was also asked to come. At the hearing the RTI Commissioner gave an order, attached as Appendix 1, which stated that the schools were to designate the last working day of each month as open day, when parents could enter the school and ask to see public documents held there.[25] These included attendance registers, accounts, and any government order received by the school. Needless to say, the order was met with resistance. Upper primary and secondary schools, which fall under a separate administrative jurisdiction in Delhi, refused to comply with the Information Commission's order and filed an appeal against it at the High Court of Delhi. That appeal is still pending, as a result of which open days are not held at upper primary- and secondary-level schools in Delhi. Primary schools, however, began to hold open days, and that practice continues, the only remnants of the social audit exercise still in operation.

Over time, open days have also been adopted by school management committees (SMCs), which provide a space to hold discussions with the teachers and the head teacher on specific issues. Each month a particular topic or issue is chosen and the open day is devoted to acquiring detailed information about it. The topic for discussion is chosen at a meeting with parents and SMC members, called by JOSH.

At the open day observed by this researcher, the topic was mid-day meals. The school principal provided all the registers and receipts regarding this issue to the five parents who were present that day. The attendance of parents at open days is not high, and tends to include mostly parents who are also SMC members. Ever since social audits were first conducted, SMCs have become fairly active and acquired pride of place as parent bodies, along with other forms of parent participation subsumed by SMCs. The head teacher was ambivalent about the importance of having an open day, stating that all records are now in the public domain and available to SMC members anyway. A special day, in her opinion, was thus not really necessary.

Rajasthan: creating a public portal

A public portal that provides information on all public programmes, including education, has been created in Rajasthan. It is accessible to everyone and contains information pertaining to state-level data as well as micro-level data. In education, for instance, a user can access information for their local school. This is a very new initiative (it began in 2019) and has yet to be fully developed and exploited. Unfortunately, it relies on data from individual departments. This means that if data are not collected or not digitised, they cannot be uploaded on the portal. Thus, the shortcomings in data generation that exist in education, have unfortunately been trans-

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24 - According to the RTI Act, if information is not provided within 30 days of the request, an appeal can be put to the Information Commission.
25 - The order is available as Appendix 1.

ferred to the portal too. However, it is hoped that over time, as more people begin to use the portal, pressure will come to bear on the authorities to improve their data systems.

Modes of communication

When the Indian Right to Education Act was passed in 2009 and the social audits were first initiated, awareness about the RTE Act was poor. Hence, many modes of communication were used to get the message out to communities before they could be expected to participate in the social audit. These included:

- Self-help groups:[26] seeking out people in collectives helped to capture their attention. Women in self-help groups or workers at MGNREGA worksites proved to be a captive audience and could be drawn into conversations about the RTE Act and the social auditing process.

- Street and home meetings: one-on-one meetings were also held at street corners, teashops and homes. In some states, people were invited to meetings, often during home visits or with school children acting as messengers. In some instances, meetings were held at the school, too.

- Indirect approach: in many instances, the facilitators began their interaction with community members by discussing issues of common concern such as water, land, or NREGA. They even helped people to get a job card or rations if they were facing problems. Once a rapport had been established and their trust gained, the subject of the RTE Act and social audits could be broached.

- Dropouts: in some cases, meetings were held near the homes of the dropped-out children, with the children invited to the meetings, too.

- Local government officials: in some states, active Panchayat members were asked to convene meetings. This lent weight to the proceedings and drew a larger crowd.

- Other networks: in areas where communities were recalcitrant, the facilitators used other special interest networks, such as those working on forest rights or improving livelihoods, and through them reached out to the community and drew them into discussions about the RTE Act and social audits.

5.4 Assessment of stakeholder participation

Members of the civil society team ASTHA were unequivocal in their assessment of the essential role played by the local community in conducting the social audit. In their view, without community participation the process would not have worked because:

1. It is their children whose future is at stake.

2. The community's strength lies in their numbers.

3. Officials do not monitor on a regular basis, and then too superficially, while parents and the community can monitor continuously.

However, they also felt that if there had been no one to provide information and guide the community during the initial period, the process would not have taken off. As explained by one of the block monitors: 'It will take around three years for a community to completely get used to the idea of social audits and community monitoring if the role of the facilitators and block monitors is to be reduced or even removed.' A Panchayat facilitator

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26. Self-help groups (SHGs) have emerged as a strategy for women's empowerment in which groups of women pool their joint savings according to a regular schedule, for the use of individual group members. SHGs encourage savings, the opening of bank accounts, and inter-loaning among group members. The most significant aspect of these collectives is that they are wholly managed by the women. In groups where most of the members are semi-literate or illiterate, there is often a NGO which provides hands-on training to the group members. Once the members become capable of running the group independently, the NGO works out a suitable exit strategy.

added: 'If the community is empowered, the administration will be tightened.' Echoing the same sentiment, the district coordinator said: 'There is strength in collective complaints as opposed to a single one.'

In terms of participation by different socio-economic groups, the fact that attendance in government schools is overwhelmingly from the lower end of the social and economic strata, meant that participation from these groups was higher. The challenge was getting them to participate at all. That is where the different strategies used to communicate and mobilise played an important role.

It is worth noting that minority communities, Muslims in particular, were under-represented, even in the community of government school parents. In Rajasthan, this could be because communal tensions have increased in the last couple of decades, and interactions across religious lines have decreased. These social divisions tend to be more pronounced in rural areas. That is why in Delhi, participation by Muslim parents, especially in the public hearing, was higher than in Rajasthan.

Similarly, participation of women was much higher in Delhi than in Rajasthan. In fact, this is a striking feature of the Delhi experiment. Not only did women come out and take an active part in the social audit, but this very involvement provided them the opportunity to find their voice, the first time for many. That women were heard and could speak directly to officials was a hugely empowering experience for them. It has led to an interesting turn in their participation in education since then. Many of the women contacted for this research now work closely with government school officials on issues related to education. They have been useful in bringing matters requiring urgent attention to the notice of officials but, at the same time, the system has also co-opted them to a large extent, and their role as a check on the functioning of the establishment has been reduced. On the whole, however, this experience has increased the personal presence of women in the public sphere.

5.5 Forms of collaboration, trust (or distrust), leadership and power dynamics

Drivers of trust (or distrust): teachers

An important element of community participation was building trust with the teachers. Typically, teachers tend to believe that any audit or monitoring process, especially those involving parents and civil society groups, will turn into a blame-game with them as the target. In recent years, a great deal of hostility has built up between the teaching establishment and the community. It was therefore clear early on that unless the teachers were brought on board, the social audit would not succeed. But, with teachers participating, the weight of community grievances increased manifold. They are powerful and taken far more seriously by the education establishment.

A two-fold approach was adopted to win over the teachers:

• First, include their personal grievances in the audit. In this way, such issues as delays in being paid; the burden of non-teaching duties; teacher shortages; lack of infrastructure that impacts their work space as much as it does the space of learning for children, were made part of the grievances to be taken up with the establishment.

• Then, align the goals of the teachers with those of the children and the parents. Better learning outcomes, better infrastructure, regular attendance of children, and better health of children were presented as goals in the interest of teachers. By supporting these objectives, they would push their own agendas as well.

These strategies appear to have worked, at least in Rajasthan.

In Delhi, the situation however was quite different, as even the information gathering phase for JOSH also proved difficult initially, and schools in Delhi were not welcoming. In fact, doors were shut to all non-government actors. The creative use of the RTI Act to access information, described above, did help to break some of these barriers. And after the initial resistance, the teachers came forward and provided both information and other help needed. But the community in Delhi remained distrustful of JOSH and the social audit partly because they had not previously been mobilised for the issue of education and did not believe that a community-based organization could be effective This was especially true for a NGO so young as JOSH, and so the community was very reluctant to participate in the audit process. However, the situation changed when JOSH took up the matter of a girl who was molested by a school teacher. They filed a complaint with the relevant authorities, including the police, and had the teacher arrested, despite his political contacts. Seeing the results of their collective action proved very powerful in bringing the community together, and generating trust for JOSH and the social audit exercise. JOSH took advantage of this and decided to hold a public hearing to launch the social audit.

Graph 1. The leadership of the initiative trusts me: Head teachers and teachers (No. of responses)
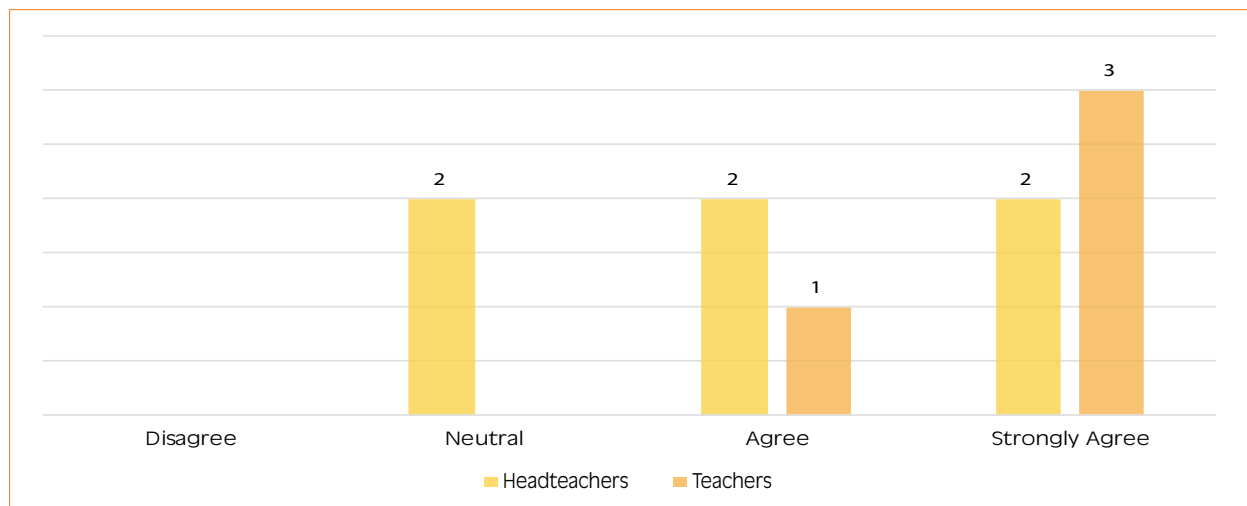
Graph 2. The leadership of the initiative trusts me: SMC members, parents, community (No. of responses)
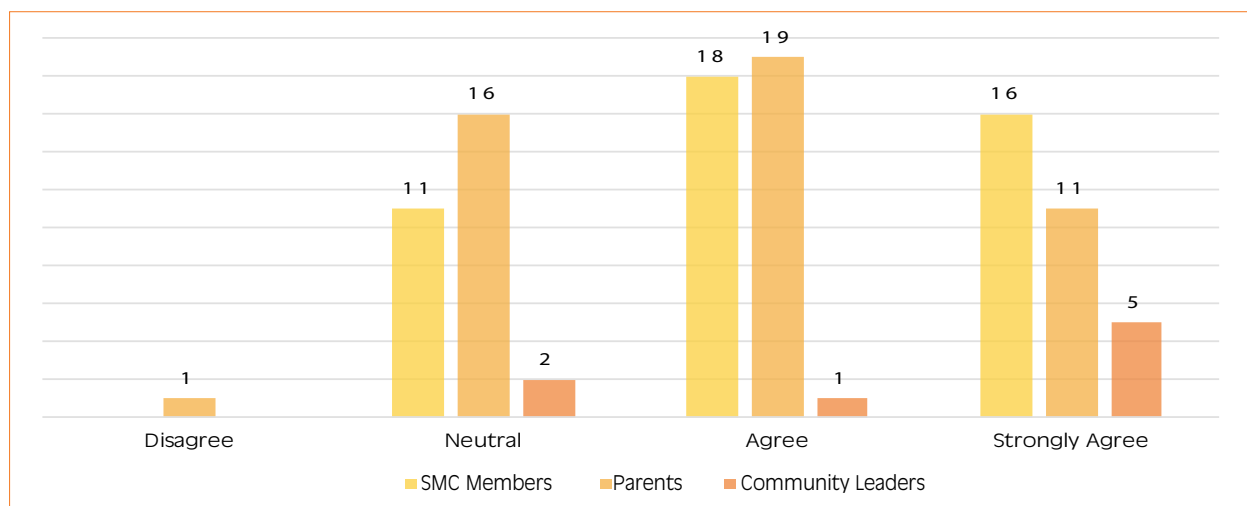
Collaboration

In Rajasthan, collaboration was achieved among civil society groups. For instance, they were able to tap into self-help groups and NREGA worksites, as already mentioned. Dove-tailing education issues with other pressing life matters helped to draw attention to the school social audit. The groups working with women proved particularly helpful as they began including education as a regular feature in their meetings. This collaboration proved useful in drawing women to social audit meetings as well.

In Delhi, collaboration was achieved with local community leaders who were striving to expand their own base in the community. One ran a coaching centre in the sample area, where tutorial classes were provided to children. Through this activity he had access to schools, which otherwise would have proved difficult for the social audit group. By collaborating with him, JOSH was able to reach the parents of the children who came for coaching, as well as the schools. Delhi is also home to some of the larger networks of community groups, such as the National Coalition for Education, which has teachers' unions affiliated with it. For this reason, the coalition was not happy with complaints being filed against teachers, especially during the public hearing. They therefore, refused to participate in the social audit process. The newly formed RTE Forum – a network of NGOs working on education – also stayed away, citing the 'grievance' model as limiting and not aligned with the 'core' objectives of education. But, over time, as the social audit process drew to an end and JOSH began to focus on other strategies, the NGO has been able to collaborate with the RTE Forum on many other fronts.

Leadership and power dynamics

Power dynamics within the school were bound to be affected by the social audit process, as 'ordinary' parents began asking questions and taking an interest in the functioning of schools. Government schools in India are largely patronised by children from lower social and economic strata, to which teachers and the school management do not belong. This class hierarchy has kept parents away from schools. In Delhi, the challenge was particularly severe, as women were at the forefront of the social audit exercise.

Another set of actors who felt threatened by the social audit were school inspectors, who thought that their role was being undermined once parents and civil society established a direct relationship with the education bureaucracy. However, sympathetic elements within the bureaucracy, in particular one of the education officers, helped smooth some of those ruffled feathers and opened the way for the social audit.

A surprising amount of resistance also came from some established civil society groups working on education in Delhi. In the initial phase of the social audit, they felt that their turf was being encroached upon. Another objection arose from the belief that their carefully cultivated relationships with local officials would be upset, making it difficult to work with them in the future. This was not an unfounded fear. And it did come to pass, as revealed in the research, when the Delhi government filed a case against JOSH and challenged the order to have school documents made available for public scrutiny on the last day of every month. Interestingly, in this case, the individuals running JOSH were charged and not the NGO itself, and despite offers to settle the matter out of court, the government has not acquiesced.

However, the biggest blow came after the first public hearing held by JOSH, where parents turned up in large numbers and complained bitterly about the schools and their teachers. The panel took serious note of the complaints and issued orders accordingly. This did not go down well with the teachers. As mentioned above, teachers are important to politicians during elections in their role as voting booth officers. Immediately after the public hearing, which was also widely reported in the media, the Chief Minister of Delhi summoned the NCPCR and asked them to step back, virtually signalling the end of the social audit.

In Rajasthan, social audits have also been resisted by the administration. However, the power dynamics were less disruptive there. This is partly because Rajasthan has a long history of very active civil society groups, who have made a secure place for themselves both in the community and with the government. In many in-

stances, the two have collaborated very amicably. Although resistance to social audits certainly existed, it did not entirely upset the process. Yet, there were murmurs within the social audit group itself, especially by the Panchayat facilitators, who felt that they were not included in the discussions with officials and treated only as foot soldiers. As they acquired confidence in their work and the role they played, the social audit 'hierarchy' also created some resentment within their ranks.

Graph 3. I know the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the initiative (No. of responses)
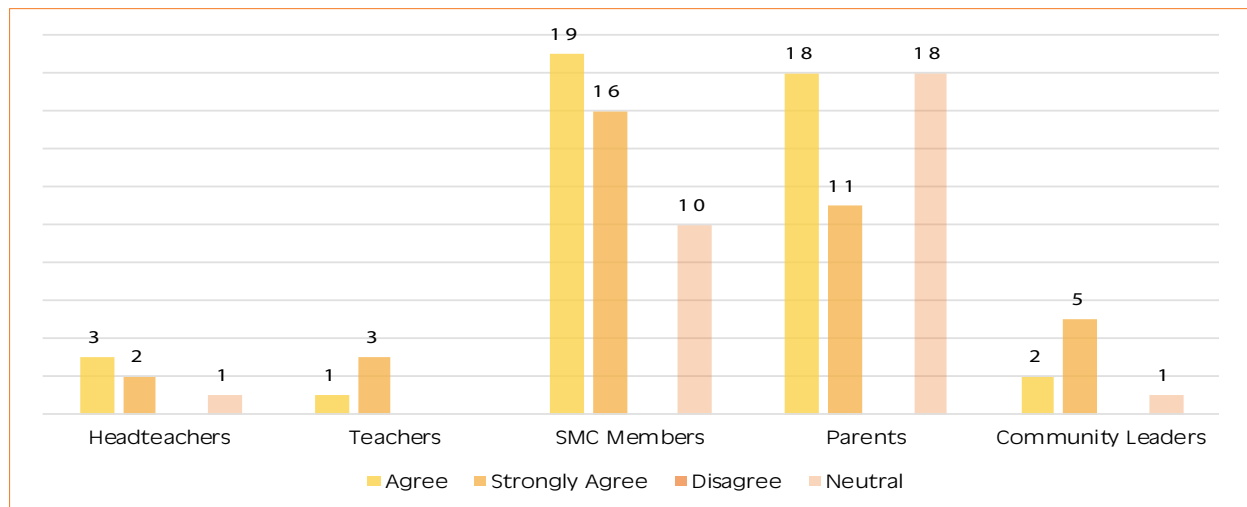
6 ● Stakeholder perspectives on the efficiency of the social audit process
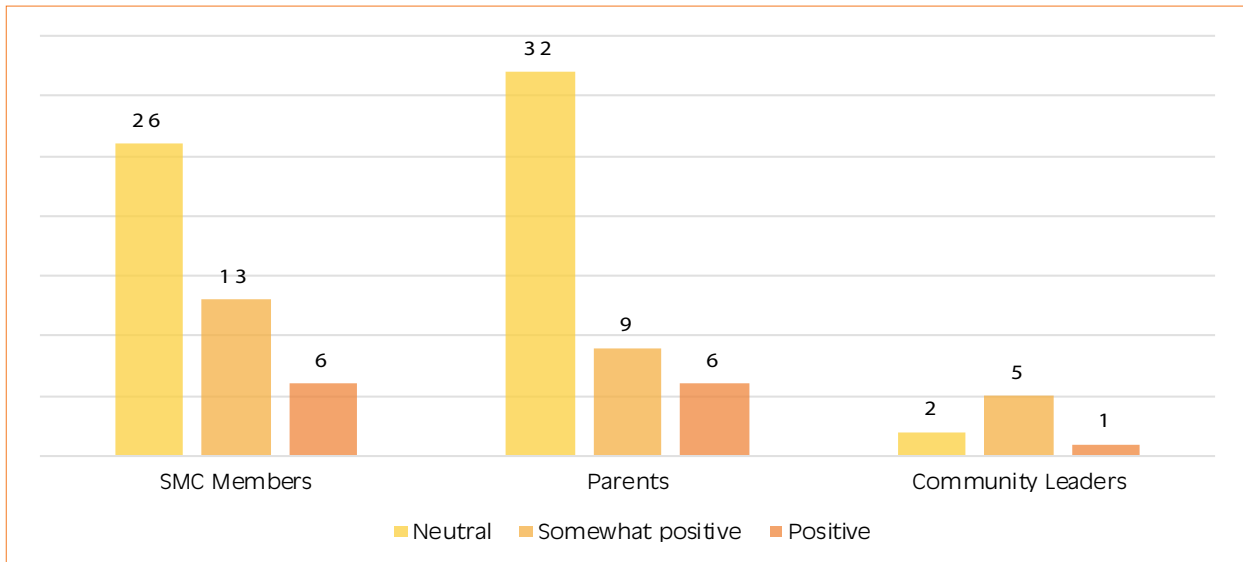
6.1 Community perspective

In Rajasthan, some community members remembered the social audit experience after it was discontinued, because the Panchayat facilitators were known to them and had continued to work in their area.

According to these community members, the main difference made by the social audit process was that the teachers had started coming on time and staying until the end of the school day. Furthermore, the quality of the mid-day meals had improved and they were made aware that no fees were to be charged. They also checked to see if all the children were enrolled and attending school regularly. In general, they felt that the facilitators engaged in a real way with the school, keeping the interests of both students and school in mind. They noted, however, that infrastructure deficiencies they continued to be a problem.
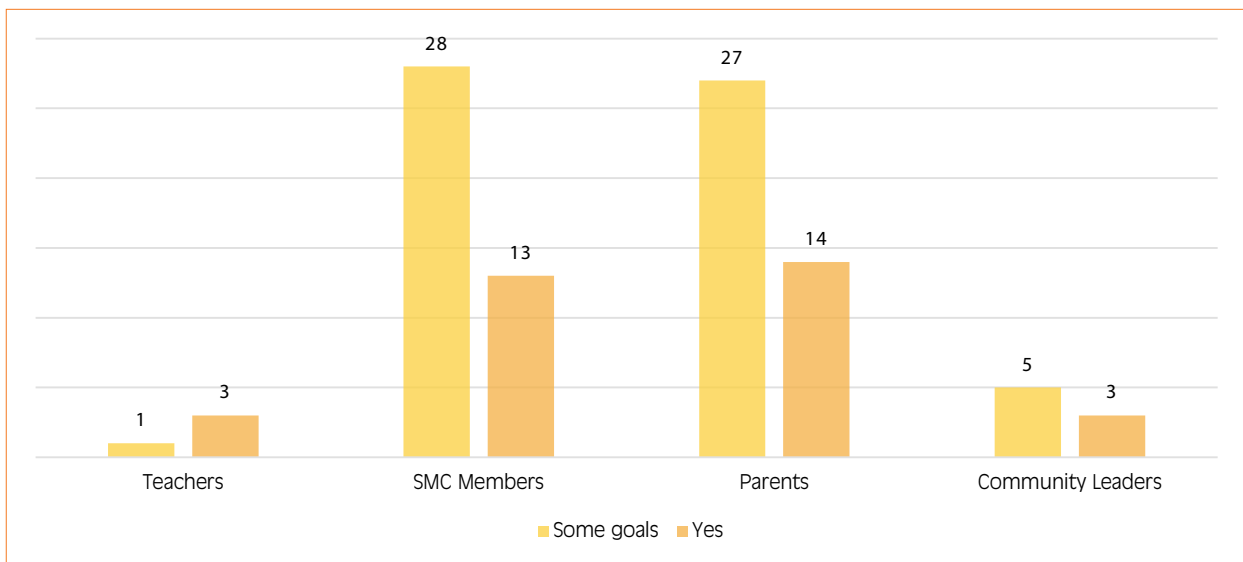
When asked about their own role and involvement in the school, community members said that they had become informed about the work and responsibilities of the school management committee and even went to the SMC meetings themselves on occasion. But since many of the parents were illiterate, they couldn't tell whether their child was learning or not. Some could enumerate a few specific improvements, such as the installation of a handpump for water close to the school compound, floor mats (*durries*) for classes, and utensils for mid-day meals. The SMC also put a request to the relevant authority for electricity and regular water supply in the toilets. But because these issues cannot be resolved at the sub-state level, they remained pending for a long time.

Although only a few people knew about the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), they were all familiar with the RTE Act. They felt there was a strong need for the Panchayat facilitators, and saw them as someone who had brought 'information and knowledge' to the community. One SMC member felt that the district coordinators and block monitors helped raise awareness about education and also helped them in finding solutions to many problems. They felt that their role remains important even today, after the momentum generated by the social audit had died down. And, while the SMCs are more active now, they are not as effective on their own.

Graph 4. Overall impression of the community (No. of responses)

SMC Members — 26 (Neutral), 13 (Somewhat positive), 6 (Positive)
Parents — 32 (Neutral), 9 (Somewhat positive), 6 (Positive)
Community Leaders — 2 (Neutral), 5 (Somewhat positive), 1 (Positive)

■ Neutral ■ Somewhat positive ■ Positive

Graph 5. In your opinion, has the initiative achieved its goals? (No. of responses)

Teachers — 1 (Some goals), 3 (Yes)
SMC Members — 28 (Some goals), 13 (Yes)
Parents — 27 (Some goals), 14 (Yes)
Community Leaders — 5 (Some goals), 3 (Yes)

■ Some goals ■ Yes

6.2 Government school teachers

According to the teachers interviewed in Rajasthan, the Panchayat facilitators would come to the school to meet with the teachers and head teachers. The facilitators asked to see the Child Tracking Survey report in order to use it to conduct another household survey. They checked the infrastructure and also the attendance of children by doing a head count and corroborating this with the attendance registers. The facilitators also

spent time talking to the children and sometimes even taught them as they checked their schoolbooks. All the information collected was transferred to survey forms. In addition, community meetings were held so that information about the RTE Act could be shared with the community. The teachers found the facilitators useful in helping to select SMC members since they knew the community well. Often the facilitators participated in SMC meetings too.

On the whole, the teachers did not find the presence of the social audit facilitators disturbing. However, they did express some irritation at being asked for information 'too often' and felt that the social audit process was overly data-oriented. It did put a burden on them to prepare and fulfill such special requests. As one of the teachers said: 'While the social audits were welcome, they could have been done in less time.'

One teacher described the social audit as follows: 'NCPCR's role was to enquire about enrolments, mid-day meals and dropouts. For two and a half years their representative came regularly to the school. He checked if teaching was taking place properly in the classrooms. He organized SMC meetings as well as community meetings in the school about twice a month, to make the community aware of the issues in schools.' This teacher believes that the social audit led to applications being sent to officials at the block level that ultimately resulted in two new classrooms being built. However, there is still no water in the bathrooms and therefore they cannot be used. Applications for handpumps were also submitted, but to no avail. She added, with a strong sense of conviction, that social audits are extremely important and they should have continued. However, she knew nothing at all about the education dialogues, which were held regularly every month, but which she was never asked to attend.[27]

According to a head teacher: 'Monitoring does help in getting the community actively involved. The teachers, knowing that they are being watched regularly by the community, become more alert.' He said that there were only two teachers in his school before, but after the social audit he got four more appointed. Just sending a request to the officials was not enough, but when they accompanied the block coordinator and 'the village community packed into two car loads' to the Block Education Office, their requests were taken seriously and the new teachers appointed. 'I alone could not have done it. The support of the community is necessary. Together with the community and the SMC, a raised platform on the front side of the school has also been built. It creates a space for the children to play, as there is no proper playground for the school.'

The teachers in one of the Panchayats said: 'This process can help the teachers, too, since parents come more often to school and we can get our own work done as well.' In other words, they can take up issues related to their students' education with the parents directly. Another teacher felt that, 'before, parents only came on two days (15 August and 26 January)[28] but now they come at other times as well… This process has increased our own understanding of the home environment of the children.'

The teachers also admitted that small complaints were being dealt with on the spot. It prompted one of them to declare that: 'As we cannot rely on government monitoring, community monitoring and social audits can make a real difference in the quality of education.' In general, the teachers all agreed that monitoring is the right of the community. They added that it allows them to take their problems to parents as well. In particular they said: 'If the school needs something and the demand comes from the community it has a greater impact on the government, compared to teachers making the request alone.' As far as public hearings are concerned, they agreed that through this process solutions could be found. However, they did find the hearings burdensome as they were put on the spot and had to provide answers in a public forum. But it also forced them 'to read the RTE Act and all the orders related to it' since they had to go fully prepared to the public hearing.

27- She complained about the fact that she has been made an e-Gram worker, which involves collecting information about the whole village community. This information is required to be sent once every month and again after every six months. These non-teaching duties are a clear violation of the RTE Act.

28- These are the two national holidays celebrated in schools.

Graph 6. Overall impression of the social audit (No. of responses)
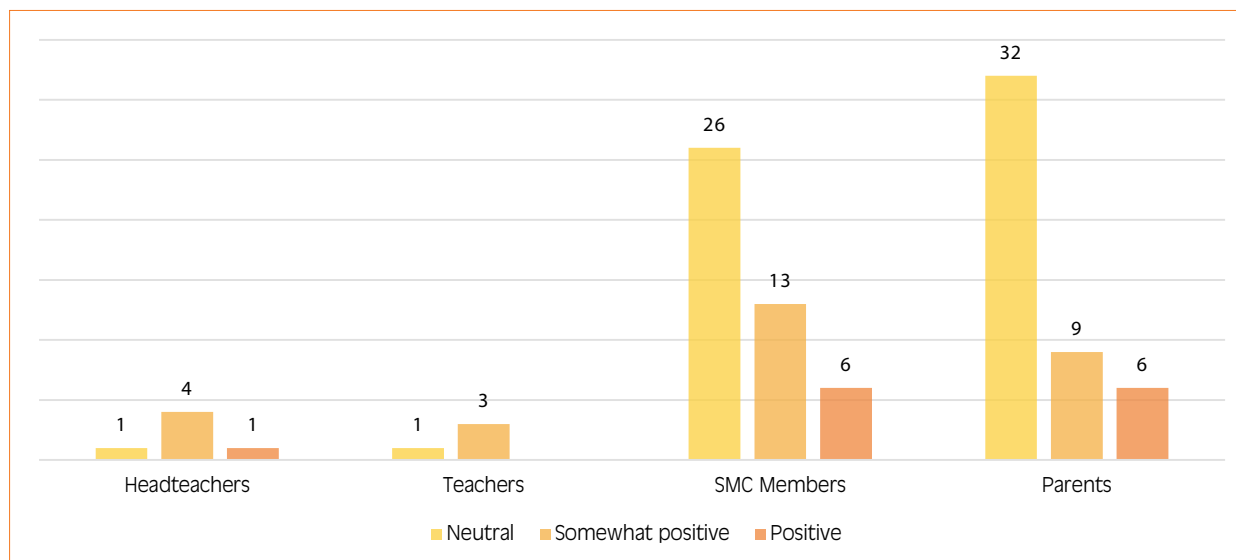
6.3 Education officials

Block Education Officer, Rajasthan

While the Block Education Officer (BEO) accepted that monitoring is actually the government's responsibility, he said that the government is not able to do so properly. 'I have to look at 415 schools and there are simply not enough resources for me to do justice to the social audit. For example, I have no financial or in-kind support for making visits to schools. I have to depend on teachers to take me to their school or request transportation from someone. No vehicle has been provided.' He added that ASTHA's intervention and this social audit had helped him learn about the situations on the ground, which he could not have discovered on his own, or was even aware of. In addition to the lack of resources, a BEO's time is consumed by mundane administrative matters – teachers' requests for leave, their salary slips, their grievances. 'Through this social audit we learned about issues and problems that we normally don't come across.'

He had been amazed to see people come in large numbers to the public hearing at their own expense, prompting him to say: 'When people start to speak, then there is no need for legislation?' However, he was also of the opinion that 'now everything has gone back to as it was before.' At the time that the social audit took place, 'another environment was created and a new direction was evident".

While the Block Education Officer was aware of the education dialogues, he felt that an official from the main administration should be made the convenor, since issues arise that are beyond the BEO's authority, such as water, electricity, land records. In later years, the District Collector – in charge of all administration at the district level – was made the convenor of the education dialogues. This person has the authority to summon officials of all the line departments to meetings. This initiative in which the District Collector participated, continued for a few months in another district of Rajasthan (Kumbhalgarh) and was very successful. Unfortunately, change in political leadership at the state level brought that to an end, too.

Education Officer, Delhi

In Delhi, daggers were drawn with the administration, which refused any cooperation at first. Nevertheless, JOSH decided to go on the full offensive, filing grievance redress complaints, using the open day to get parents to visit schools, ask for answers, and hold the public hearing. This continued through the period of the social audit and beyond. After about three years, JOSH began toning down their strategies. They realised that filing complaints could not be the only *modus operandi*, and therefore they adopted a longer-term perspective, involving collaboration. This proved a turning point for the officials as well. The focus also shifted from bureaucrats to school authorities, and JOSH began working more closely with school management committees. Now they hold grievance redress camps only for larger issues, beyond the scope of the school, such as textbooks not arriving on time. For these events other organizations and media are also contacted for support. With hostilities with officials abating, JOSH has been able to formally adopt schools, where they now work on a consistent basis to develop transparency and accountability throughout the education system.

At the public hearing in Delhi, the Education Officer took a more conciliatory stand, not displaying any of the aggression and arrogance shown by the teachers. On the contrary, she appeared quite contrite and willing to make amends. She even put forward some of the restrictions that she faced as well – particularly those related to financial inadequacies – and sought solutions from the panel. It became clear that the Education Officer was herself operating under severe state capacity constraints. She remained an ally of JOSH for the period of the social audit, seeing much merit in the process and realising that her own constraints could be addressed in this manner as well.

6.4 The social audit team

The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)

Members of the RTE Division at the NCPCR were interviewed for this study to hear their views on what the social audit had achieved or not. Here are three responses:

> Member of RTE Division 1: *'The pilot was a one-of-a-kind initiative that had begun to create and build momentum between the state and civil society and ultimately the communities, but was abruptly halted. It was thus a lost opportunity that had the potential to create the space for a sustained dialogue. Dialogue being a necessary condition for arriving at solutions, the social audit made huge strides in the direction of creating that space. If it had been allowed to continue and eventually be institutionalised, it could have grounded a citizen-based system of open government for education.'*

> Member of RTE Division 2: *'The NCPCR pilot on community monitoring of the RTE Act was an effective method to generate awareness on the provisions of the Act itself, strengthening community participation in school education and creating a decentralised grievance redress mechanism for elementary education in India. It gave teeth to the NCPCR to effectively carry out its role of monitoring the implementation of the RTE Act as mandated. It also provided strong insights to influence policy. The process involved active participation of civil society organizations using a rights-based approach to constructively engage with the administration. The only challenge to the process was perhaps on the modalities of scaling it up nationally since it required substantial human, technical and financial resources.'*

Author (as Head of the NCPCR team that conducted the pilot): *'The social audit pilot provided a unique opportunity to the National Commission to experiment with the exciting modality of citizen participation in monitoring the provisions of a human rights legislation – the RTE Act. In developing the pilot, the Commission brought together a diverse set of civil society organizations – all with interest in promoting universal education – albeit from disparate perspectives. As such it widened the scope of civil society interest in education. It also developed for the first time a unique methodology for conducting social audits in education. The formal tools it provided to citizens and citizen groups proved extremely useful in collecting data about the actual implementation of the Act, as well as in relaying that information to the administration when asking for redress. This created the possibility of engaging in a dialogue with state actors, and enhancing transparency and accountability in the system. It further provided citizens with information that they could use more effectively in their interest. The use of the RTI Act was important in this process and served to both sharpen its use, but also to throw up some of the challenges that ordinary citizens face in using it. Most of all, the social audit pilot bridged several gaps – between the teachers and the community, between the community and the establishment, and between civil society groups as well. The momentum that was generated carried over to areas beyond the pilot sample, and if it had continued and been institutionalised, it would have made a long-lasting impact on the governance architecture of education.'*

The Rajasthan Team

On the NCPCR's role: All the community monitors felt that their association with the NCPCR was very important because it ensured that the authorities and the teachers could not oppose the social audit initiative. All of them were intimidated by the NCPCR. If the process were to be restarted, they emphasised the necessity of having NCPCR affiliation beforehand in order to have access to the schools. According to one Panchayat facilitator: 'it gave us authority and respect.' Without NCPCR backing, no teacher will listen to us, he said. However, they also felt that while the role of the NCPCR is important, they have built relationships with the current administration on their own and can imagine this process going forward even without the Commission's full support if it were re-started. According to the project coordinator, the administration now writes to them officially seeking support for many of its activities, like the orientation programme for new students.

The District Coordinator

The district coordinator (DC) felt that his role was largely that of a problem solver, although he also made occasional visits to the field to check on the functioning of the social audit process and to provide moral support to the facilitators where needed. In addition, he collected summary reports from the block monitors and used these to prepare District Reports. The latter were used in follow-up meetings at the district level, as the DC's role was also to liaise with the district officials and ensure that permission for working in schools was maintained and follow-up action undertaken. While the Rajasthan administration was familiar with the work of ASTHA and hence access to their offices was not difficult, the DC still needed to keep them abreast of the activities and make regular visits to their office to ensure their cooperation.

Block Monitors

The block monitors (BMs) saw their role mostly in terms of meeting block officials and helping the Panchayat facilitators. They sometimes accompanied them on their visits to schools. However, the monitors were appointed at an intermediate level between the Panchayats and the district, which in a large state like Rajasthan, in par-

ticular, was considered necessary. Having only one district coordinator would not be enough to coordinate the work of all the facilitators and thus having another level in between the district coordinator and the facilitators was especially important. The role of the block monitors thus was simply to ensure the smooth functioning of the Panchayat facilitators, to liaise with block officials and to keep the district coordinator informed.

Panchayat Facilitators

The Panchayat facilitators (PFs) considered it one of their main tasks to fill in the survey questionnaires correctly. They said this helped to identify any outstanding issue and focus discussions during a community meeting. Since they had never used such surveys before, they said they helped them learn how to deal with data and analysis, and also how to summarise the findings. According to one facilitator: 'It actually helps one to start the rest of the work.'

Other insightful comments made during the interaction with the social audit team included:

> 'Surveys are like our weapons; without these weapons we cannot fight for our rights, just like in a war how can we fight without any weapons …"
>
> 'We can easily collect information for surveys…"
>
> 'Information from the surveys establish the truth of the situation."
>
> 'Surveys formed the basis of advocacy.'

However, the facilitators also felt that fewer surveys would have been preferable. For one of them, 'the language of the survey questionnaires was difficult', and for all of the facilitators, the surveys should have included a section on the quality of teaching.

Apart from this, the facilitators also organized community meetings and interacted with teachers. Their interaction with officials, however, was minimal as that role was taken up mainly by the block monitors and district coordinator. It was noted that due to the wrapping up of the project, time constraints prevented them from finding solutions to all the problems encountered. As facilitator commented: 'We could have achieved a lot more, as a very positive environment had been created.'

Concerning the team structure, all facilitators felt that the three levels, i.e. district coordinator (DC), block monitor (BM) and Panchayat facilitator (PF), were necessary. However, as the facilitators did the bulk of the work on the ground, there was a need for an additional facilitator in each Panchayat, as opposed to only one per Panchayat as employed in the social audit pilot. It was also felt that the block monitor and Panchayat facilitator salaries were too low.

All members of the social audit team agreed that powerful vested interests, including the Panchayat members, had interfered in the auditing process and tended to side with teachers, making it difficult for the facilitators to operate.

The Delhi Team

For the Delhi team, the social audit was a learning experience as they had not worked with such a structured and formal process before. It was also their first opportunity to work with people who were generally receptive, even though in the initial phase there was some hostility. This proved to be an important and critical learning process for them, which set their work path and orientation for the next two years.

6.5 Domains of accountability

Government accountability

Block-level Public Hearings were one of the ways used for enforcing government accountability. In Rajasthan, the public hearing served as a platform to present the findings of the social audit and elicit a response from the administration. This is an important step in the whole social audit process, especially because it keeps everyone motivated. It appears that in Rajasthan, the inability to introduce education dialogues led the civil society group ASTHA to focus on public hearings as the main means to ensure accountability.

In following this approach, ASTHA relied on its good reputation and the relationship it had built up with the government officials over nearly three decades of work in the area. They were able to conduct public hearing surveys without jeopardising cooperation with officials, especially the senior officials, who have continued to provide exceptional support to the social audit pilot study. However, the social audit team did find that the lower-level officials, including the teachers, did make attempts to convince the community to bring complaints and other grievances to them directly, rather than raise them in the public hearing. One reason may be that the block officials, particularly the block education officers, were unaccustomed to being summoned to hearings and made to answer in a public forum. They were rattled by this kind of public accountability.

Education Dialogues did not take place as expected in either Rajasthan or Delhi. Both sites therefore focused on public hearings instead. However, at the end of the social audit exercise, a state government order was issued making it mandatory to hold education dialogues every month at the block level. Unfortunately, it was a weak and badly drafted order. For instance, it restricted the participation to a few chosen NGOs. Furthermore, the procedures were not well defined and left for each block to work out. Thus, in one block, the dialogue was held immediately after the 'open house' – a general meeting of the block. Most Panchayat facilitators and teachers were not aware of the education dialogues. Those who had attended them mentioned that they had been organized only once or twice and did not include the larger community. According to them, the dialogues turned into meetings where a general discussion of the RTE Act took place, with not much participation by the community. The government order, however, prompted blocks outside of the NCPCR social audit pilot area to begin holding these dialogues, too, as the government order was intended for the whole state. In Kumbhalgarh (another block in Rajasthan), for instance, several successful dialogues were held for a couple of years after the social audit pilot ended. But, unfortunately, there too they have ceased.

In Delhi, the education dialogues could not begin at all, due to the absence of a similar government order. An important platform for government accountability on a range of issues that emerged from the social audit experiment was thus unable to take root in the governance system.

Graph 7. Under this initiative, education officials are held accountable (No. of responses)
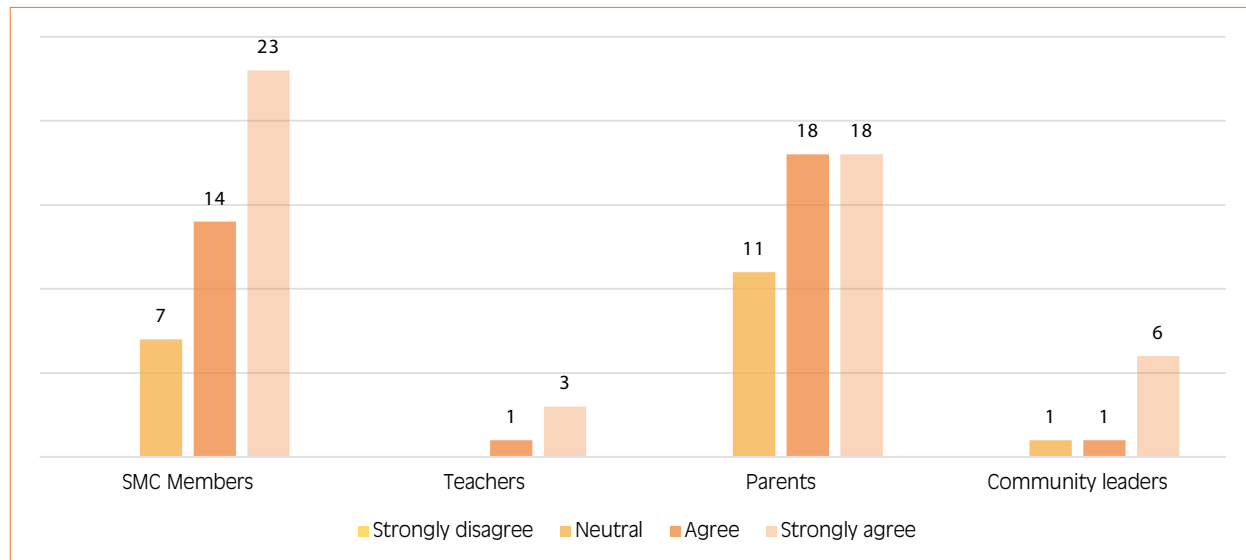
Pedagogic accountability In one of the blocks in Rajasthan, the Panchayat facilitator and block monitor set up a monitoring committee at the Panchayat level (Panchayat Nigrani Samiti), which brought together 12–13 people from the village, the panch (village council), village head, elders, women and some other enlightened people. This committee checked the regularity of teacher attendance and quality of learning using simple methods like making students read from their schoolbooks. The monitoring committee would also take up other issues as they arose. Typically, committee members would inform the school authorities, as well as the facilitator, about their meetings and what transpired. Unfortunately, this process, too, has now stopped. In another Panchayat, a youth forum (*Yuva Manch*) was set up that functioned in a similar manner as the monitoring committee. The forum, too had 10–12 members (mostly local youth) who checked the quality of learning by asking children to read from books. They also organized community meetings, and helped dropped out children return to school.


Box 2. Youth Forum ['Yuva Manch']

- Youth forums have been set up in different ways in Rajasthan, where young people of a community or older children in school participate in school life. In many schools these forums have superseded what were originally children's parliaments. Children now take part in cleanliness drives, function as class monitors, mentor younger students and organize cultural activities. In areas where the teachers themselves are more actively involved, the forums play a positive role and can improve school functioning. More importantly, they help students to better understand how schools operate and what expectations to have, which can spur them to ask for their dues or motivate them to do better, as the case may be.

- However, in terms of increasing accountability in the school itself, youth forums need allies beyond the school. While the students are able to access more information, including that of teacher absenteeism, they are not in a position to challenge the teacher or the system on their own. In cases where youth from outside the school can get involved, the scale of activities can be enhanced by forming links with the administration or non-government organizations who are able to help make improvements and increase accountability by taking up issues that go beyond the school level.

Accountability by praxis

One of the unintended consequences of the social audit in Rajasthan was the demonstration effect it had on places that were not part of the social audit pilot area. As word spread that the administration could be coaxed into restoring rights and addressing grievances, communities and parents began similar action in their schools, citing the cases from the social audit as precedent. For example, such a demonstration effect was noticed in a Panchayat that was not included in the audit where 'teachers along the entire route, in schools beyond the pilot as well, started coming on time'. This established a sort of 'accountability by praxis'.

Graph 8. Under this initiative, the school administration is held accountable (No. of responses)
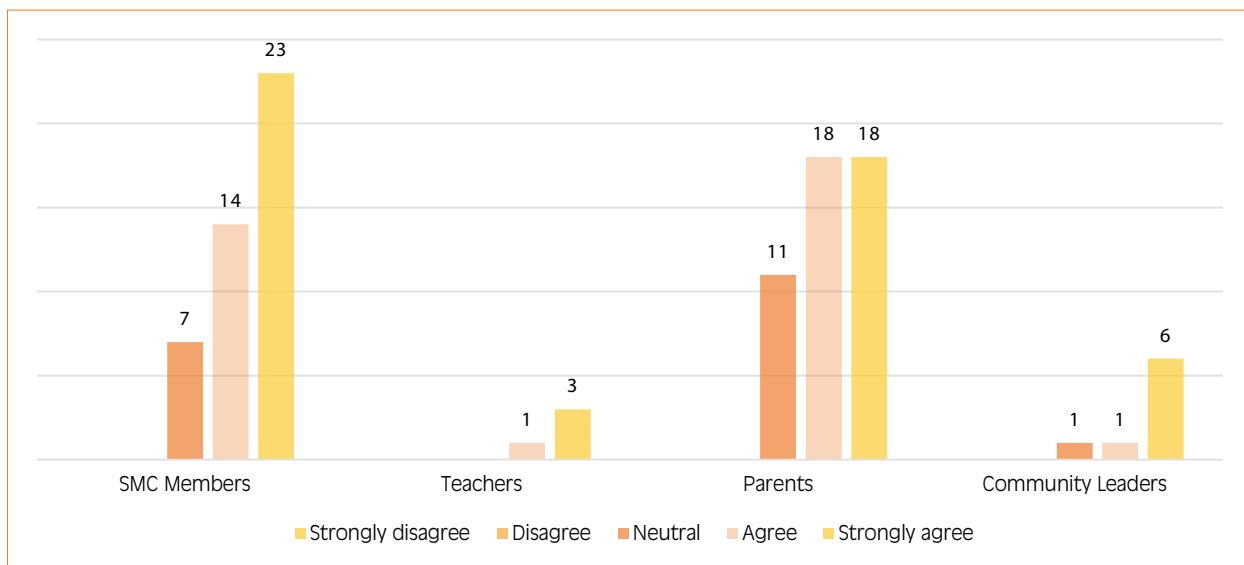
7 ● Impacts of the social audit initiative

Monitoring has never been the focus of education, but its potential is immense. When the community started to talk about monitoring, the teachers felt threatened and affronted. This was expected, but did not stop the social auditing process in most places. Also, in Rajasthan, since the Panchayat facilitators were from the local community, they could easily establish a good working relationship with teachers. In Delhi, by taking an active interest in education, the government and the school management committees in particular, have continued the tradition of parental monitoring – at least to some extent.

7.1 Transparency

Due to the problems faced by government officials in taking action to redress a difficult situation, the elements of the social audit that have survived or been adapted to date, involve largely issues of transparency. In the semi-structured interviews with officials, head teachers and teachers, their response to the idea of open government was therefore more positive and they were more willing to provide information, but this was not the case for 'social audits' per se.

In Delhi, the open day system that was launched during the social audit continues to date, providing a real window onto transparency in schools. While used more by school management committee members than the parents at large, it has nevertheless emerged as an enduring means for achieving transparency in schools. Unfortunately, it has not been extended to upper primary and secondary schools.

Similarly, the Public Portal set up by the Rajasthan government provides an opportunity to put all records and documents related to education on a public platform that is accessible by all. Efforts to provide real-time information have also enhanced transparency. While the portal is still in a nascent stage due to lack of technical capacity in digitising data, it is hoped that as the use of the platform increases, pressure to generate and upload more information digitally on the Portal will also rise.

Graph 9. Stakeholders who participated in the implementation (No. of responses)
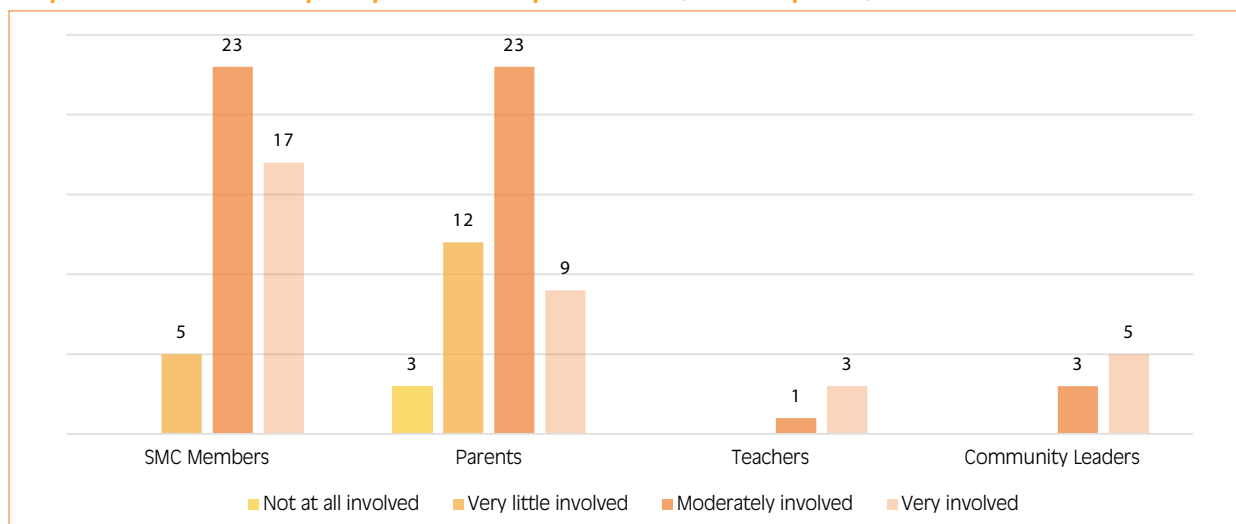
7.2 Accountability

Public hearings were one of the primary tools used during the social audit for ensuring accountability. The impacts of the two main hearings held in Delhi and Rajasthan are described below.

Rajasthan

According to the social audit team members, even one public hearing had an impact across the whole block. They said that people's faith in the social audit process increased when they realised they had a forum in which to air their grievances. Many different issues were raised, such as who should clean the school premises, including toilets – a highly contentious issue due to its basis in caste hierarchies. As a result, this issue was discussed at length during the hearing. Corporal punishment was also discussed at length, as were infrastructure deficiencies and the role of private providers of mid-day meals. A union of MDM cooks also participated in the hearing. Teachers and officials – especially the Block Education Officer, who is unaccustomed to having to confront a large community turnout – developed a fear of the social audit.

Some issues were also resolved on the spot, such as the suspension of a teacher who often came to school drunk. There was also a longer-term impact in that the meetings held at the central level included detailed discussions on public hearing presentations. Follow-up of the public hearing became an agenda item in these meetings. After the public hearing, school management committees were formed at the general meeting, and soon regular SMC meetings were held. Several state government orders were also passed, such as one demanding answers to questions raised at the Public Hearing, and another related to ensuring that improvements in the school take place. In addition, the Block Education Officer held a meeting and asked all the teachers present to commit in writing to not making mistakes again. The teachers, however, were not willing to share these orders with the social audit team.

Delhi

The Delhi public hearing held on 20 April 2011 was a landmark event in the social audit exercise. More than 2500 people attended the hearing that was marked by a huge outpouring of emotion through the testimonies presented by parents and children, some of which were very disturbing. The panel responded in accordance by taking a tough stand with the officials and the teachers.

The procedure adopted by the NCPCR included sending the list of grievances that they received in advance of the hearing to the concerned officials, thus allowing them to come to the hearing prepared with their responses. In some cases, officials were able to redress the complaints beforehand. However, in Delhi, one of the teachers actually locked up a family to prevent them from deposing before the Commission at the hearing. They literally had to be rescued by JOSH.

The hearing started with a boy testifying against a teacher who would routinely ask him to buy alcohol for him from a neighbouring store, resulting in the teacher being inebriated during school hours. This, disturbing as it was, raised several other issues too. For one thing, locating a liquor store in proximity to a school is a violation of Delhi government rules. For another, selling alcohol to a minor in the shop is also a violation of the law. As there were several other complaints related to the store, these were also addressed.

As the hearing proceeded, parents who had not previously submitted their complaints also tried to come forward to give testimony. One such parent (a daily wage earner who managed to push his way onto the stage), said that he had studied until grade 6, but his son in grade 8 knew less than he did. There were also women in burqas (veils) who stepped out for the first time in a public forum and spoke about the state of schools.

The teachers did not take well to the barrage of complaints against them. When asked to respond, they pushed back aggressively, denying wrong-doing, even taking an offensive stand. This hostile reaction from teachers surprised the panel and the exchanges became quite heated. The Commission took note of all the responses and made suggestions, including action against the egregious behaviour of some of the teachers. These were all documented and sent to the Education Department for action. However, this was not the end of the matter. The media present at the hearing reported on it quite extensively and neither the Education Department nor the teachers came out shining. The back and forth elicited a sharp push back from politicians, including the then Chief Minister of Delhi. In India, the Constitution has set down a number of 'non-teaching duties' to teachers, including a large role in the electoral system. They are required to be present at voting booths on election days as 'booth-level officers', to prepare and verify electoral rolls. As this role makes teachers important to politicians, they become kingmakers, able to make or break candidates and, as such, can easily solicit political favours. No politician wants to get on the wrong side of teachers. This classic patron-client situation has had a deleterious impact on teacher accountability.

The negative response that the public hearing organizers received from the Chief Minister of Delhi meant that the suggestions of the Commission were ignored. In other words, no action was taken. It was a huge let-down for the community and for JOSH. The cooperation and trust that had been built up before the public hearing evaporated. JOSH and the NCPCR had to think afresh and come up with other strategies to get the community back on board.

Graph 10. How often do you provide feedback? (No. of responses)
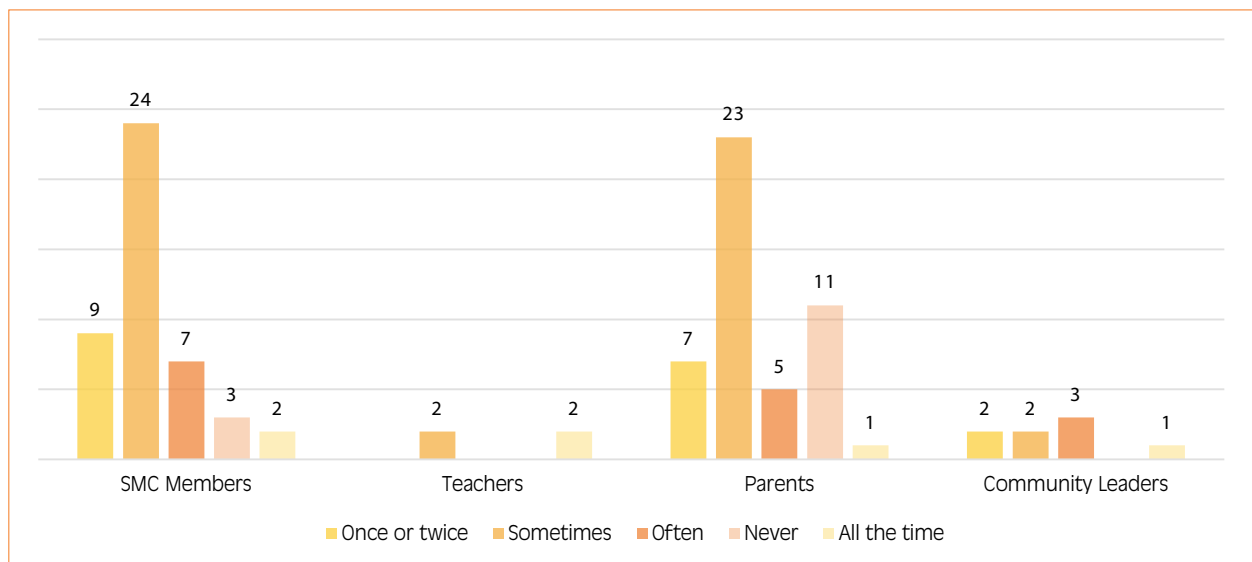
7.3 Empowerment of women

The Delhi case is special in that it provided an opportunity for women to come out and express themselves in the public space. Their empowerment has endured, andmorphed into a more political role for them. After the public hearing, the youth group was disbanded, and more formal staff consisting mostly of about 20 women were recruited. The focus also shifted from mobilizing and awareness raising to working with parents and the community. A core group, consisting of about 10 women, was formed in every school. These groups have survived to-date, with several having integrated school management committees. Having been well-trained by JOSH on the RTE and RTI acts, they are able to play an active role in the SMCs. JOSH, too has been able to continue working with these women's groups and SMCs.[29]

Organization of community meetings with women (©CPR)

However, with the political party in power in Delhi (AAP) capturing places in the SMCs, this already contested space became politically contested as well. As a result, for the women who worked on the social audit to be able to continue to work in education, including through the SMCs, they needed to align themselves politically with the AAP. This co-option of the women by the political party has had two consequences, one positive, one less so. On one hand, it has provided the women with legitimacy, access to politicians, power for themselves and space to function. It is this empowerment and sense of recognition that has kept them motivated since working in the SMC is otherwise a thankless task, as revealed by the JOSH coordinator. It has also helped the community and JOSH push agendas through to political actors. On the other hand, the negative impact is that dissent is now reduced.

29- When a new political party (AAP) came to power in Delhi in 2015, they started to focus on education. However, they also captured the SMC space by ensuring that their volunteers were elected to the SMCs. This was done by bringing out new rules, e.g. that anyone could self-nominate as long as they had 10 signatures in support, which were not publicised, leaving many parents out of the loop, and allowing AAP supporters to get into SMCs.

Graph 11. Overseeing the initiative (No. of responses)

Legend: ■ Very little inolved ■ Moderately involved ■ Very involved
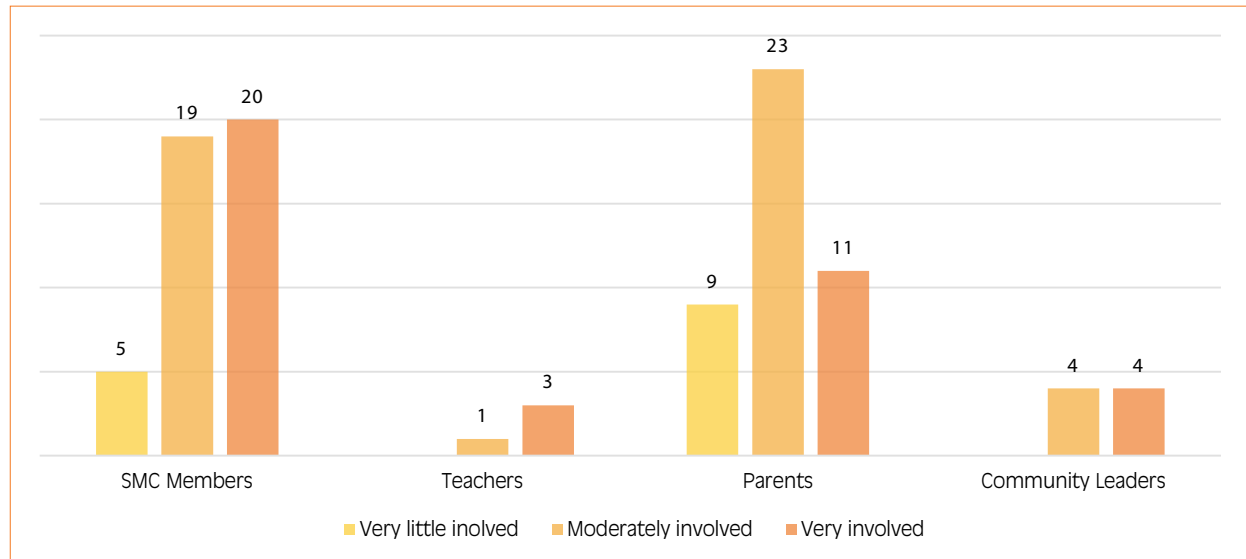
7.4 Tangible outcomes

In terms of the more tangible outcomes of the social audit, schools in Rajasthan started opening on time and teachers became more punctual. Even those who came from afar started coming by jeep in order to make it to school on time. Enrolment of children increased. SMC meetings were being held more regularly, and school records were updated. Corporal punishment was controlled and children became more aware of their rights. As one teacher said: 'Children now refuse to clean the toilets or school premises when asked to. But at least toilets became functional and children started using them.' According to some Panchayat facilitators, no fees are being charged anywhere in the pilot area, and the quality of mid-day meals has also improved (cooks started cooking better) as people have begun to check meals in the school. However, this was possible only where the food is cooked on site. In the other blocks where the Nandi Foundation (a corporate-funded NGO) provides the meals no monitoring (and accountability) system could be put into place.

Many out-of-school children were eventually enrolled in school. In one block, 1,250 out-of-school children were identified and about 700 of them enrolled. Unfortunately, some dropped out again later. In another village, with the help of the community, four new teachers were appointed. In the primary school, a kitchen was sanctioned and built from the Panchayat funds. In this case, the social audit team along with the SMC members were able to bring about a change by involving the Panchayats. Interestingly, after the auditing process got underway and change began to occur, some teachers began telling the community that if they had a problem they could come directly to the Panchayat facilitators rather than go to ASTHA or take them up in the public hearing.

In Delhi, tangible outcomes were slow to arrive. As the public hearing had generated a political backlash, not much action was taken on the complaints. This also put JOSH on the defensive as the expectations of the community were dashed. But the entire exercise nevertheless created space for JOSH in schools and they

continued to make visits there using the ID cards provided by the NCPCR.[30] This ongoing interaction with the school and its administration proved a sort of face saving for JOSH and allowed them to continue their work and engage with the community despite the setbacks.

More important, the RTI request that JOSH had filed to access school records allowed them to enter the schools once a month and conduct community monitoring. Also, many other grass roots groups, who had earlier stayed away, began to use the RTI Act to do inspections. This process took on a life of its own and set off multiple other processes.

30- These were identity cards provided to all the personnel working on the social audit that stated their name, the NGOs name and their affiliation with the NCPCR. This established their 'official' status and gave them access to schools and records.

8 ● Conditions of success and strategies for improvement

8.1 Creating conditions

Without community participation, this social edit exercise could not have been realised. All the changes that occurred were due to the involvement of the community. It is clear that raising awareness within the community is a very important part of such an exercise, especially one that seeks to ensure transparency and accountability. In the case of the RTE social audit, community participation proved to be an essential element in the process leading up to the actual audit. Various strategies were used to get the information and message across. An exercise that involves sharing power, especially with those who have been denied access to it, requires establishing a receptive environment first. The public or government schools in India are largely used by people who do not share power equally with those who provide education, so a social audit is a big event for both groups. The ground must be carefully prepared in advance. Delhi and Udaipur in Rajasthan offer examples of two different pathways.

8.2 Withstanding backlash

In Delhi, in particular, politicians and administrators were vehemently opposed to the idea of a social audit – especially one that involved criticism of teachers. As we have seen, teachers have an important role to play in the political system, as electoral and voting booth-level officers. As such they are of great value to politicians, who in turn resist attempts to cross paths with them. Breaking through this 'nexus' was difficult and could not be achieved without being forceful and taking determined action. JOSH decided to do that by starting with the public hearing, which in effect declared their intentions and made clear that they would not step back from calling out the powerful if needed. It was a bold strategy and it worked as it helped to mobilise the community and involve local people in the social audit. But for obvious reasons, the approach required some rethinking down the line but without losing its effectiveness. In other words, in particularly difficult situations, a certain amount of courage and willingness to stay the course is, or could be, a condition for undertaking a process such as a social audit.

8.3 Building bridges

In Rajasthan, the groundwork had already been done because of experience with previous social audits, albeit in MGNREGA. As mentioned earlier, this was both an advantage and a disadvantage. The former, as no new ground had to be broken, and the latter, because the establishment was wary of being put under the scanner. However, in this case, ASTHA was able to build bridges with teachers by taking into account their concerns as well. This broke the impasse between the community and the establishment. Bridges were also built with other civil society actors, such as the women's self-help groups and MGNREGA groups. As a strategy, inviting

members of different political parties and other groups to join the panel during the public hearing also proved useful in Rajasthan.

8.4 Collaboration vs confrontation

Another important strategy that worked was to position the social audit not as a blame game, but as a means of collectively and collaboratively addressing the shortfalls in the education system. Much civil society action tends to take antagonistic positions against the establishment, often painting themselves into a corner. By starting with a collaborative approach, some of those fears were allayed.

8.5 Using formal structures and processes

Conducting the surveys helped to collect evidence about the school and use it to file complaints. The complaints were also used to plan how to take those issues forward. Other important information was extracted from the questionnaires. Similarly, the household survey was seen as a valuable activity. It provided an opportunity to enter people's homes and establish contact directly with community members. This made it possible to gather a wide range of information that often went beyond the scope of the survey.

8.6 Facilitating organization

As communities by themselves are at different stages of empowerment, the presence of a facilitating organization is often a needed for mounting an exercise such as the social audit. Collecting information through surveys, informing parents and organizing platforms for dialogue and accountability require facilitating by an organized group. Time-tested and well-established structures, such as school management committees or the Panchayats, can play this role, provided the government works to enhance their capacity. However, that could take a few years. Until then, support from a local group is a pre-condition for initiating a successful social audit exercise.

8.7 Feedback loop

Feedback from the administration is essential to sustain the social audit process and maintain the motivation levels of both the auditors and the community.

8.8 Follow-up

Along with government feedback, there should be follow-up by the community and/or the facilitating group. Often, in order to ensure feedback, much follow-up work is required. This is another reason why the facilitating organization is necessary.

9 ● Conclusions and recommendations

Based on conversations with the stakeholders involved in the social audit – including the NCPCR team that designed and supervised the pilot project – several important and interesting insights emerged. These are listed below. Overall, it would be fair to say that it was a successful experience that created awareness in the community about their entitlements under the RTE Act, provided them with critical information about the education system and enabled them to participate in a dialogue with state actors. Taken together, this was an empowering experience for them and a learning process for education officials and teachers as well. It is unfortunate that the project did not continue and the momentum it created died down. However, it did have some tangible outcomes and some aspects of the social audit process have survived, albeit in altered form.

The experience of conducting education dialogues has shown that:

- Monitoring requires continuous training and awareness raising for all stakeholders, including officials and teachers.

- Innovative and creative ways of communication were useful in raising awareness and mobilising the community.

- The Panchayat facilitators were not able to involve the community in school visits. Nor were they able to include active SMC members in social audit activities or train the SMC members. At the time of the social audit, they were new to the idea of an SMC and its role. In many schools, SMC members were simply nominated by the teacher or head teacher and acted as rubber stamps for decisions taken by the school. SMC members' official training was perfunctory at best and did not prepare them for the roles they were expected to perform.

- The Panchayat facilitators' role is extremely important since they are closest to the community. Capacity building and empowering of the Panchayat facilitators would go a long way in supporting decentralisation.

- When observing action on the ground, a domino effect is visible.

- The co-option of SMC members by political parties has been an interesting development in Delhi with both positive and negative consequences. In time, as women in general and SMC members in particular begin to draw their power from the community and no longer need to rely on politicians alone, it is hoped that the negative aspects of the co-option will decrease. However, this would require considerable mobilisation of the community, as well as institutionalising government processes that can cut through political manipulation. A fairly long period of hand-holding by civil society groups is required; as one Panchayat facilitator observed, probably at least three years of intense work.

- A meaningful dialogue between the administration and the people/community is possible.

- Peoples' participation is strengthened as communities get an opportunity to be heard and have their complaints registered and followed up.

- Lower levels of bureaucracy are willing to be engaged and appreciate the opportunity to be pro-active.

- Local and contextual solutions can be collectively found.

Some specific suggestions

▶ Field staff suggested that training sessions should be held every three months or at least once every year and that such training should be provided to the Chief Executive Officer (in charge of education within the Panchayat system), the District Education Officer and SMC members as well. The social audit project coordinator also felt that it is equally important to have training sessions on other aspects, such as communication strategies and leadership, how to make arguments and build a case, and on the concept of education and ideology. However, a few people did feel that it would have helped to also train/orient the teachers and officials in advance so they would be on board from the start; this might have made their co-operation throughout the social audit more effective.

▶ There is far greater scope for transparency and accountability in schools. At present, research has revealed that crucial information regarding curricula, pedagogical practices or learning benchmarks is not being shared with parents at the school level. This is frustrating for them as they are supposed to ensure that their children do well in school, but without knowing what level of learning they should be achieving. SMC members are expected to handle other institutional information, such as budgets, mid-day meals, teacher training. Once parents become more involved in school life, they may seek to be better informed.

▶ It would be better to address one issue at a time instead of working on all aspects of the RTE Act simultaneously. What emerged from the interaction with officials was that treating the Act as a comprehensive legislation did not lead to concrete results, but handling one entitlement at a time produced better results. This may have been because the legislation was newly enacted and the bureaucracy was not fully equipped to deal with the totality of entitlements. This points to the need to build government capacity either before passing a legislation or make appropriate provisions for it afterwards. In some cases, like the MGNREGA, improvements in government capacity were included in the provisions of the Act itself. Unfortunately, the RTE Act has been remiss on that score. As a result, the education bureaucracy struggled to resolve all issues at once.

▶ There should be more regular review meetings with the social audit team to make contextual changes as necessary.

▶ Working more closely with the SMCs would make it easier to familiarise them with the procedural aspects of conducting social audits, thus lessening the need for a facilitating NGO.

▶ Future training and organizational frameworks for social audits could promote interaction between Panchayat facilitators and officials. Since the facilitators come from the community and thus have complete understanding of the local situation they should be able to relay this information directly to the officials. The indirect method of first informing the block monitor, who in turn meets with the officials may not have been the most efficient system. It would also have helped to build the capacity and confidence of the facilitators and perhaps reduce one layer of the social audit organizational structure. It is important to take community people to meet the officials as well, especially when a complaint is involved. This not only gives community members confidence in addressing officials, but also helps to establish the validity of the issue while increasing the weight of the complaint. Officials feel greater pressure when the community is present.

▶ While surveys are useful for collecting precise information, they need to be simplified. Those used in the social audit were too complex and time consuming. Because of time constraints, the facilitators ended up spending more time on filling out forms than holding community meetings and building relationships with stakeholders. It takes time for community members to comprehend and absorb survey questions and information, and articulate their concerns.

▶ The community is diverse and not one monolithic structure: there are men, women, children, young, old, common people, and people's representatives. It would have been more useful if separate meetings based on demographic and social groups had been held.

▶ Perhaps raising awareness could have been built into the whole social audit exercise from the beginning and been a consistent element, rather than a one-off exercise. Because of the lack of broader understanding within the community, the facilitating NGO was unable to sink deeper roots into the community on the RTE issue. Similarly, not much attention was given to understanding the overall situation of the households and their attitudes/constraints concerning education. In the future, therefore, the social audit process needs to be focused first on the community and developing the capabilities of its members.

▶ Involving politicians and maintaining a thread of communication with them could prove helpful in the longer run.

▶ Fund flows and financial allocations need to be included in the list of issues to be monitored, even though they are not an 'entitlement' in the RTE Act.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Central Information Commission, Decision No. CIC/ SG/C/2011/000588/13753; Complaint No. CIC/SG/C/2011/000588

Facts arising from the Complaint:

The Complainant has filed the present Complaint under Section 18 of the RTI Act (hereinafter 'the Act'), with the Commission, contending that certain categories of document including the manuals mandated under Section 4 (1) (b) of the Act 2005, should be available in hard copy at the school. It is further contended that these documents should be available for inspection *suo moto*. As the Education Department and Government of Delhi run and maintain a large number of schools in the city, they should have all the mandated information mentioned in Section 4, in hard copy at the school premise for the benefit of the beneficiary community. This will be of immense help for them in ensuring transparency and accountability of the functioning of schools. He has forwarded a list of documents that should be available for inspection and the request is reproduced below:

1. Admission records;

2. Students' attendance records;

3. Teachers' attendance records;

4. Budget Allocations, Sanction issued and Expenditure incurred;

5. Expenditure on Educational Tours, Mid-Day Meals, V.K.S/SMC, Sanitation, and CEP heads;

6. Records of disbursements made to students on account of Scholarships, Uniforms, Books, and all other incentives given under any scheme;

7. Copies of Circulars/Notifications/Orders received from Directorate of Education & other Departments/ Authorities from time to time;

8. Various Registers like inspection Register, Visitor Register, Movement Register.

Relevant Facts emerging during Hearing:

The Commission has heard the Respondents and the Appellant. It is fairly conceded by the Respondents that certain circulars/ ACR proforma etc are only for officials/employees. The Commission is of the opinion that the basis of evaluation etc should be known to the general public.

Section 4 (1) (a) of the Act, which is a mandatory obligation, reads – 'maintain all its records duly catalogued and indexed in a manner and the form which facilitates the right to information under this Act and ensure that all records that are appropriate to be computerised are, within a reasonable time and subject to availability of resources, computerised and connected through a network all over the country on different systems so that access to such records is facilitated'. The Commission appreciates that the Department has made improvements and moving towards transparency.

Decision:

The Complaint is allowed.

The department, when issuing any circular(s) from 1st August 2011, shall decide if there is a reason why it should not be in public domain, the reason(s) shall be recorded in writing. All other Circulars shall by default be in public domain.

Furthermore, in view of the aforesaid and from the facts before it, the Commission under the powers vested in it by section 19 (8) (a) of the RTI Act, hereby directs the following:

The following categories of documents shall be available for inspection from the last working day of September 2011, pertaining to each particular school for the on-going academic session:

1. Admission records;

2. Students' attendance records;

3. Teachers' attendance records;

4. Budget Allocations, Sanction issued and Expenditure incurred;

5. Expenditure on Educational Tours, Mid-Day Meals, V.K.S/SMC, Sanitation, and CEP heads;

6. Records of disbursements made to students on account of Scholarships, Uniforms, Books, and all other incentives given under any scheme;

7. Copies of Circulars/Notifications/Orders received from Directorate of Education & other Departments/ Authorities from time to time, which are available at the concerned school;

8. Various Registers, like inspection Register, Visitor Register, Movement Register;

9. All schools of the department will have the above noted documents/registers available for inspection by citizens on last working day of each month, from 8 Am to 10 Am and 2 PM to 4 PM for the first and second shift schools respectively. This information, regarding inspection timings shall be available on the notice boards of all schools.

The Director (Education), GNCTD, shall send a consolidated report of compliance of the above directions to this Commission by 15th September 2011. The report may be sent with a copy to the Complainant.

This decision is announced in open chamber.

Notice of this decision be given free of cost to the parties.

Any information in compliance with this Order will be provided free of cost as per Section 7(6) of RTI Act.

Information Commissioner
29th July 2011

The case study

This case study developed as part of IIEP-UNESCO Research Project 'Open Government: Learning From Experience' examines the first social audit of education carried out in India, under the aegis of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). It was conducted as a pilot study across ten states of India to test the principle that citizens can act as effective monitors of their entitlements.

The study highlights the fact that accountability can be established through such processes, leading to the empowerment of marginalised social groups, particularly women. But it also demonstrates that for such citizen-led monitoring to take place, tools and processes of engagement, as well as platforms for citizen-state interaction, are required to get started and be sustained. A facilitating organization or agency may also prove necessary before the social audit methodology can be institutionalised.

The study concludes that building bridges between stakeholders and state actors, and working on the basis of collaboration rather than confrontation, play an important role in making social audits work.

The author

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