Effective Panchayats in India

KNOWLEDGE HUB ON PANCHAYATS IN INDIA
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After 25 years of implementation of the historic 73rd Constitutional amendment, Panchayati Raj Institutions have developed unevenly across India. While devolution has been effective in some states and in some domains of development, there is no systematic understanding of what enables and/or disables their effectiveness. Political will to make panchayats effective has been fluctuating at state and national levels. Lessons from experiments by civil society to mobilize panchayats around delivery of basic services do not impact district and state level mechanisms and systems. Systematic and sustained advocacy efforts with select state governments and national ministries/agencies have been inadequate, and the momentum for sharing, dialogue and mutual learning amongst practitioners, researchers and policy-makers has weakened.

As critical challenges of increasing inequality, stagnant access to basic services and youth unemployment confront India today, sustained efforts to make panchayats more effective can be very useful.

How Can We Make Panchayats More Effective?

1. **By systematising lessons** of working with panchayats by civil society at village and block levels
2. **Facilitating the co-creation of knowledge** with these practitioners to identify systemic changes necessary for **scaling up local successes** to district and state levels
3. **Co-convening dialogues** with political policy makers, state governments, State Finance Commissions, State Planning Commissions, and State Institute for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj to share the systematised knowledge and lessons
4. **Knowledge dissemination** through various media channels and digital platforms around specific domains (education, health care, nutrition, water, sanitation, skilling, livelihood) in locally appropriate languages and idioms
5. **Engage colleges and universities** to utilise the systematised knowledge and lessons in their teaching and research, including research by students

Why Partner with PRIA’s Knowledge Hub on Panchayats?

The Society for Participatory Research in Asia’s (PRIA) mission is making ‘Democracy Work for All’. Since 1995, PRIA has worked with Panchayati Raj Institutions, Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR), State Election Commissions (SECs) and State Finance Commissions (SFCs) to influence policy and promote participation of the most vulnerable, excluded and marginalized sections in the functioning of PRIs. PRIA has also expanded, developed and deepened the participatory movement in decentralized governance across the country through its efforts to build leadership among women, Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Capacities of PRI officials and elected leaders have been built to enable them to assert their access to and control over local, natural, human and other development resources and generate own resources. PRIA has trained 125,000 elected representatives, focused on women/SC/ST panchayat leaders, and 50,000 citizen leaders have been shaped to facilitate engagement between communities and their panchayats.
PRIA’s signature Pre-Election Voter Awareness Campaigns (PEVACs) to raise the awareness of voters in villages towards the panchayati raj system collaborated with SECs and SFCs, strengthening elected PRI representatives to function effectively in a democratic and accountable manner. Panchayat Resource Centers (PRCs) and Urban Resource Centers (URCs) created at intermediate and district levels promoted people’s participation in planning and implementation of development programs through knowledge dissemination and sharing.

Over 20 years, PRIA’s success in bringing people and their panchayats together to make panchayats more effective has resulted in:

- Mobilization of >50,000 gram sabhas every year
- Leadership strengthening of >10,000 women elected representatives and 10,000 SC/ST elected representatives
- By working together with a consortium of partners nation-wide, PRIA co-convened several multi-stakeholder dialogues with State Finance Commissions and State Election Commissions to make panchayats more accountable
- PRIA developed PRCs in 52 blocks. Its PRC model was accepted by Government of India in 2004 and later became part of the National Capability Framework
- Decentralized development planning in 24 districts resulted in planning methodologies appreciated by Planning Commission, and PRIA’s approaches are reflected in the National Capability Framework
- PRIA was recognized as a National Resource Centre in strengthening panchayats, often approached by MoPR and the Planning Commission (Government of India) for support and knowledge resources
- PRIA was part of the task force constituted by the Planning Commission to prepare the Manual for Comprehensive District Agricultural Planning (CDAP) and the Manual on Integrated District Planning
- In partnership with university Centres for Social Inclusion, PRIA supported practical studies on SC & ST leadership in panchayats, including functioning of Social Justice Committees
- Over the past 15 years, PRIA has also undertaken concrete field pilot programmes to enable panchayats to improve delivery of basic services—primary education, maternal health, water, sanitation, livelihood, social protection—to poor and excluded households

PRIA is an acknowledged research partner and knowledge generator on panchayati raj in India. It has conducted numerous participatory research studies to generate new knowledge related to the functioning of PRIs in India. It has researched and published many “firsts”.

- First ever study on finances of panchayats in the country
- First ever balance-sheet on status of panchayats
- First factsheets on panchayats across the country
- First ever study on status of District Planning Committees (DPCs)

Its professional assistance on research and practical, participatory action to strengthen local governance continues to be sought by many state governments and international agencies like United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).