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PRI

1999

Joint Intervention Towards Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions

PRI-NCRSO Initiative

The Panchayati Raj Institutions programme was initiated as a result of the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution which promoted a decentralised democracy in the country. It recognised the Panchayat as the third level of the government and opened up possibilities for strengthening people's participation in decisions making regarding their own development. It also set forth a process of providing and building up new leadership from amongst women and the weaker sections of the rural community.

PRIA and the Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organisations (NCRSOs), in keeping with their philosophy of promoting people centred development, undertook a programme of joint strategic intervention to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) The main objective of the programme was to enable the PRIs to function as institutions or self-governance and not as mere implementors for decision taken elsewhere.

Programme Initiatives

Towards this end, the PRIA/NCRSO team designed a series of inputs such as **awareness campaigns, training to strengthen capacities of voluntary organisations and elected representatives of PRIs, research and documentation, preparation and dissemination of educational materials and bottom up planning process**. It was hoped that as a result of this intervention, a meaningful dialogue with the government (both Central and State) will be established. thus, influencing the policy framework of local self-governance.

In 1995-96 the eight NCRSOs work in eight States, i.e., Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, coastal and western Orissa, western Rajasthan, Gujarat, Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and southern Kerala. Apart from these, PRIA actively works in six districts of Haryana and five districts of Himachal Pradesh.

Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions was initiated as a result of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, which promoted a decentralised democracy in the country. It recognised Panchayat as the local level of government and opened up possibilities for strengthening people's participation in decision making regarding their own development. It also set forth a process of providing and building up of new leadership amongst women and weaker sections of the rural community.

PRIA is involved in two distinct but related activities. Firstly, coordinating the joint intervention in terms of strengthening self-governance, through the Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organisations (NCRSOs) in 8 states and secondly, directly working in some parts of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh.

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to develop capacities of their staff in training, research, documentation and micro planning on PRI and provides regular on-site support.

During 1995-96 over 150 structured trainings, and orientation programmes were organised. Over 70 materials. Reports (training manuals, study reports, newsletters, pamphlets, booklets, posters) were prepared and disseminated. There were more than a dozen exercises of bottom up planning process with local people's involvement in order to bring Government machinery closer towards the issue of participation of elected members and Gram Sabha members in the local governance.

Impact

- State Governments recognised the NCRSO members as a resource support organisation in the state who have brought the self-governance issue to the fore front.
- PRIA with its joint initiative established a direct network of over 500 VAs who are working on Panchayati Raj issues in 10 states. They in turn directly work with 20,000 elected members and another 30,000 are reached through dissemination of educational materials.
- Prepared a cadre of people who act as facilitators to spread the concept of self-governance and its operationalisation at the micro level.
- Raised the 'issue of women' participation - through research, training and information dissemination in many places. VAs, Gram Panchayat members and Government staff are now giving importance to women's participation and involvement.
- Focused on 'Gram Sabha'. Due to focused intervention. Gram Sabha is being organised in many Gram Panchayats,

After two years of work during Phase I (1995-97), PRIA's intervention in strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in India were evaluated by a team of external facilitators (Mr. D. Bandhopadhyaya and Ms. Laxmi Krishnamurthy). Their evaluation report was presented to PRIA and the NCRSO team and discussed at length.

Perspectives in PRI Initiatives.

- PRIs are viewed as institutions of local self-governance, and not as mere implementors of centrally determined development programmes
- Bottom-up comprehensive planning to be the basis of self-governance.
- PRIs should not be allowed to become the third tier of development administration.
- Emphasis on active participation in decision making by women (and other weaker sections) with a view to enhance their role, status and leadership in local self-governance.
- Building, promoting and empowering new leadership of women, SC/ST anti dalits
- PRIs should assert their access to and control over local natural and human resources as well as other developmental resources available with State and National Governments.
- Strengthening PRIs will entail developing clarity of their roles, systems of governance, accountability, transparency and inter-linkages.

The evaluation highlighted two major aspects of our work. The first was to do with wide-spread information dissemination in local languages to voluntary organisations,

elected representatives of Gram panchayats and Gram Sabha members. The second was research on the ground to facilitate learning, on the one hand, and to engage district, state and national level governments, on the other. While commending the work undertaken by PRIA and its partners, the evaluation team strongly recommended the need for pursuing a more systematic documentation and research process with a view to having a multiplier effect on a wider scale.

The revised thrust of PRIA's interventions in strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions was then articulated in the following manner.

The Present Approach

Direct Strengthening--Field-based activities at a cluster of Gram Panchayats

Promotional Interventions-involving other civil society organisations, to make self-governance an issue for others.

Research and Advocacy-Conducting a systematic study of Panchayats, using study findings for dialoguing at higher levels (district, state and national) for policy change.

Networking--Developing fora, collectives or Panchayat members and community groups for sharing each other's experiences and working together on the basis of collective learning. This revised programme strategy is since being implemented. Some illustrations of that are described below.

Activities 1997-98

Capacity Building

The thrust of capacity building has now been spread more widely. Continued work with voluntary organisations to support their intensive engagement in PRIs has inducted workshops, training programmes and field exposures. Nearly 40 new voluntary agencies have been supported in this manner during the year, while still continuing to extend support to 157 voluntary organisations associated with during the previous years (the states covered in this regard include Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Kerala).

In the initial years, capacity building support was provided mainly to voluntary organisations, women Panchayat Leaders and Gram Sabhas. New areas of focus during the year included young women's Kishori Panchayat, government functionaries, Micro-Planning and Panchayat Resource Centre.

Capacity building support to Voluntary Organisation during the year included workshops on Tribal self-governance, (significance of Central tribal bill for Scheduled Areas) and increasing coverage of Panchayati Raj strengthening activities. Trainings organised for women Panchayat Leaders focused on their roles and responsibilities in Panchayats. At the level of Gram Sabha, capacity building efforts were directed at effective Gram Sabha meetings with informed participation by all Gram Sabha members, including the weaker groups.

With regard to the new thrust areas under capacity building support, the work of CENCORED specifically with young women (Kishori Panchayat) in Bihar (where Panchayat elections are yet to be held) consisted awareness generation on social issues and opportunities provided for women under the 73rd (Panchayat)

Amendment. The attempt is to build an environment where adolescent girls (budding women Panchayat representatives), and through them adult women, acquire organising, communication and leadership skills in order to make for effective women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institution in the future.

Capacity building support was extended to 10 government functionaries of State Training Institutes involved in Panchayat trainings, where the focus was on revitalizing training methods, as in the case of SSK working in Uttar Pradesh.

Intensive Micro-Planning exercises with the community were conducted by all the NCRSOs culminating in a national level workshop to share learnings. The process aided an understanding of critical issues in bottom-up Panchayat planning and those which needed to be raised with the government to bring about policy changes. In Madhya Pradesh, SAMARTHAN carried out micro-planning in Jamonia Tank Gram Panchayat in Sehore district. During the process it was learnt that government schemes (e.g. DWCRA), did not adhere to a time frame while sanctioning money, leading to huge losses and delays in implementing and availing benefits under the scheme.

A number of workshops were organised around the issue of Panchayat Resource Centres in five States, emphasizing the need for Panchayat information centres at village, block, district and State levels and the role of information providers. In SSK, Panchayat Information Centres have since become the focus of all capacity building and other supporting activities aimed at strengthening Panchayati Raj in Uttar Pradesh.

In Haryana, PRIA has set up two information centres at the Gram Panchayat level (one in each Gram Panchayat) where micro-planning exercises were carried on to the village people. These information centres most importantly serve as a forum for discussing decisions taken during Panchayat meetings. One block and a state level Panchayat Information Centre have also been established in Haryana.

Monitoring and Advocacy

The main areas covered under monitoring and advocacy work under the Panchayati Raj Programme included studies on women, role of Panchayat Secretaries, Gujarat Finance Commission, Structured Dialogue with the Government (August 1997 in Delhi, November 1997 in Lucknow), Gujarat dialogue on Tribal Panchayat Act and UNDP Study on Decentralised Governance in India,

- Two studies were undertaken on women's leadership in Panchayats. One was a profile study of women representatives in Gram Panchayats. It was based on research findings of three studies conducted in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh respectively. The other study highlighted issues and concerns on women's leadership in gram panchayats. The study covered six states, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Kerala, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. The major finding of the study revealed that even though the membership of women in PRI has increased in numbers, in terms of strategic power, the important functions all too often remain with the males,

The study on the role of Panchayat Secretary was conducted in two states, Himachal Pradesh and Haryana. It covered different aspects of the functional relationship between the Panchayat Secretary and the Gram Panchayat with the Government functionaries at the block level. It identified problem areas and ways to overcome these problems, leading to a more effective functioning of the Gram Panchayat.

- In a specially convened session in Delhi, PRIA and its partners shared the findings of these studies with senior government officials (Government of India) and resource providers with a view to propose changes in policies in policies and programmes. This even was well received and has since inspired PRIA to periodically share its findings in a systematic and ongoing manner.
- UNNATI and collaborating voluntary organisations in Gujarat in their memorandum to the Gujarat Finance Commission. highlighted issues that indicated certain systematic shortcomings. The memorandum also contained suggestions on how to augment Panchayat finances in the state. An NGO consultation on January 9, 1998 to focus on issues affecting Panchayat finances in Gujarat preceded preparation of this memorandum and its subsequent submission to the Gujrat Finance Commission. The latter's preliminary response to the effort has been positive.
- PRIA is involved in an international study supported by UNDP. This study is on decentralised governance in India and focuses on three areas:
 - a) decentralisation as providing the enabling environment for a holistic people-centred developmental approach.
 - b) related institutional mechanisms, methods, procedures and systems as promoting sustainable human development, and
 - c) partnership with various stakeholders and their participation and involvement as crucial for the overall success of decentralised governance. The study was conducted in Madhya Pradesh. Gram Panchayats, Jamonia Tank and Raipura in Sehore district formed two case studies for the purpose of this study.

Information Dissemination

Information dissemination continues to be a significant part of our work. There are constant changes in Panchayat Acts and procedures and updating information on the same is a major challenge. A number of local language bulletins, newsletters and periodicals on Panchayati Raj are being produced. They fall into two categories: (a) those intended for members of the Panchayati Raj Institutions, and (b) those intended for voluntary organisations and other civil society actors.

Besides, manuals, learning materials and enabling documents have been synthesised, prepared, published and disseminated. Nearly 15 books, 70 learning materials and 60 workshop reports were prepared and distributed in many, different languages throughout the country.

The momentum of our work in strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions had slowed down a little due to Parliamentary elections in the early part of the year. However, it is clear that a sustained thrust and continued engagement over a long and extended period of time is the key to our success in making the dream of building Panchayati Raj as institutions of local self-governance come true. It is a reality that disabling factors, demotivating efforts and blockades such that the strength of local institutions could be realised.

Initiatives in 1998 (Key Activities)

1. Panchayat and Finance Study and follow up (in 12 states)

To understand the state of financial devolution to PRIs, a systematic study was undertaken in 5 states (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Orissa and Kerala) One district, two Panchayat Samities and couple of Gram panchayats in each Panchayat Samiti were selected for this study. District level dialogue were organised with the study findings. Our findings show that in most of the states PRI were not given adequate financial power/allocation.

Plan for state level workshop were also prepared during the period (state level workshops were held in Kerala on November 24th, Lucknow on December 7th, Bhubaneswar on December 11th, Bhopal on December 18th and Shimla on December 22nd) State specific draft study report were also prepared. PRIA also undertook a study to understand the status of financial devolution in the states of Karnataka, Maharashtra and West Bengal.

2. Study and Documentation of Participatory Micro Planning Efforts

Micro-planning was one of the key areas of national support as pan of the capacity building efforts A national level workshop was organised to share the experiences on micro-planning with PRI members. NCRSOs experiences of carrying out intensive micro-planning exercises with the community contributed immensely 10 the process of providing clarity on critical issues in bottom up Panchayat planning and bringing forth issues that needs to be raised with the government to bring about policy changes. A consolidated document on the subject is under preparation.

3. Workshop to Link NGO-VDO--CBOs and PRIs.

4. Study on Status of Women PRI Members

New Areas--1998-1999

1. State level and National Level information Centres

2. Document the experiences of Five years of Panchayati Raj in India (State specific)

3. National Level-Role of Civil Society Organisations and Government in Strengthening PRIs

4. Advocacy

5. Networking to learn from other Experiences

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