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Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in India: Issues & Concerns in Participatory Planning

Introduction

The concept of micro level planning involving people in plan formulation and implementation is not new, right from the days of community development programme, people's role and participation has been stressed. Yet for years the national planning system has addressed only national issues and not the multiple issues and interests that had emerged at other levels, including the most local - the villages. The need for restructuring the nature of the state by evolving a structure where people themselves came to the centre of power and participated in decision making on issues that affected them began to be felt very strongly. Decentralisation soon began to be seen as an alternative system of governance where a 'people centred approach to resolving local problems is followed to ensure social and economic justice. The eighth five-year plan made an attempt to deal with this shortcoming by recognising the need to involve people in the process of development through micro level participatory planning.

The 73rd constitutional amendment act has given definite shape to the concept of decentralisation and people centred development by creating a three tier structure of governance at the district, block and village level. With respect to this Article 243O of the Constitution of India reads thus:

"subject to the provisions of this Constitution, the legislature of a state may, by law endow the panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary with respect to:

- a) the preparation of plans of economic development and social justice
- b) the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule.

In this context the responsibilities to be carried forth by the panchayats are many and varied, they have been entrusted with as many as 29 subjects of concern (eleventh schedule). Each state has passed its own act to deal with the issues of powers and responsibilities to be vested in the elected panchayats at the three tiers. Many of the leaders and members of these newly constituted panchayats have entered the political sphere for the first time and even for those who have been elected earlier the prospect of planning for their own local needs is brand new. Having been used to the system of making scheme-based resolutions the idea of making plans that are based on the needs and priorities of the local people is very challenging. Doubts are being raised as to their capacities for taking on the multiple responsibilities vested in them. Can people plan for their needs? Will the government machinery allow them the space to plan for their own needs? Do the Panchayats and people have the expertise and the skills for dealing with the technical aspects of planning? Will they be able to gather and analyse information required for systematic formulation of plans? What about the women and dalits will they be allowed to participate in the decision-making processes?

Prompted by these and many more questions, combined with a belief in people's capacities PRIA and the Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organisations (NCRSOs) began its initiative of strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in 9 states of India. The initiative has a five-pronged strategy of which participatory bottom up planning is one. The rationale behind this strategy is:

- To the planning on its head i.e. make the planning process bottom up as against the prevailing top down process.
- Process of planning as an intervention in increasing gram sabha participation (emphasis on women and marginalised groups)
- Planning as an exercise for resource mobilisation (internal and external) and allocation.
- Planning as tool for negotiation (for external resources).
- A framework for ensuring accountability of the elected representatives.

With this rationale and a belief in the people's capacities, participatory planning initiatives were undertaken in the states of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. The processes brought to ten multiple issues and concerns related to the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions, role of the government machinery, role of the voluntary

organisations and role of the community. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss these issues and concerns and suggest ways in which they may be addressed.

Planning and Panchayati Raj Institutions

As per the State Acts the gram panchayats have to maintain a number of registers and ledges for effective and systematic functioning. These have to be maintained by the panchayat secretaries, but they are rarely found in order. Similar is the state of affairs at the intermediary and district panchayats level.

Gram sabha meetings do not fulfil the quorum requirements and usually planning is related to the available government schemes and programmes. And anyway, the meeting is only for a few hours thus making the planning aspect redundant.

The ward representatives have little or no role in planning because there are no mechanisms for ensuring their accountability. They usually do not hold ward level meetings to determine the needs and priorities of the people in the ward. Issues of concern to the women and marginalised groups do not find their way in the gram panchayat and gram sabha meetings.

Rajasthan government has made an amendment to the state act making ward level meetings compulsory. The resolution passed in these wards meetings have to be discussed and passed in the Gram sabha meetings. This has led to an increase in attendance in the gram sabha meetings and have started finding their way in to the gram sabha resolutions and plans

Even though the procedures of gram panchayat and gram sabha meetings are laid down in the lists in detail, the meetings are not called and conducted as per the rules.

Linkages between the three tiers are at best tenuous. Resolutions that are made by the gram panchayats usually get lost at the panchayat samiti level, very few find their way to the district panchayats and even then, they may lie there indefinitely. Each tier has its own agenda to peruse with little or no connection with the aspirations and needs of the people. creating frustration and apathy towards the process of planning.

The panchayat secretaries continue to be accountable to the block administration, they control and manipulate the flow of information. At best they provide information to the sarpanch and not the panchayat. Similar issues of access and control exist at the intermediary and district level panchayats.

Collection of taxes and duties continues to be lax with the result that there is an overwhelming preoccupation with government funds and grants, preventing people from thinking of planning beyond the available schemes and programmes.

Issues that are related to control over resources have more stakeholders and therefore their resolution is extremely difficult at the panchayat level. Many such important issues are decided by caste panchayats or other groups and mechanisms.

Planning and the Administrative Machinery

Representation of the elected representatives in the district planning bodies is minimal, the presence of representatives from the administrative machinery is heavily in their favour with the result that people's issues usually do not find their way into the plans. Related to this is the issue of line departments which are answerable only to the state thus even if the district planning bodies make an attempt at planning the line departments are not a part of this planning.

The plans and resolutions sent by the gram panchayats, block panchayats or district panchayats may or may not be sanctioned by the administrative machinery. They are not, bound by any rule of time in giving their reasons for acceptance or non-acceptance.

At all levels there is control over the flow of information that is made available to the elected representatives at the three tiers whether it is information related to the allocation and disbursement of funds or rules and regulations related to the various government schemes and programmes.

Frequent transfers of officials and functionaries create a gap in planning and implementation of those plans.

Technical inputs and expertise required for planning are not forthcoming as the junior engineers or patwaris play hard to get and insist on doing things as per the directions and requirements of their respective departments.

Planning and Voluntary Organisations

The process of participatory planning is in nature intensive therefore it requires heavy investment of time, finance and human resources. Peoples expectations are raised and at times the organisation is compelled to take on an implementors role.

Since the process is long and intensive it raises people's expectations and because the plan implementation is linked with the time consuming process of administrative sanctions at the block and district levels. the results are usually delayed. This brings about a sense of frustration and apathy among the community members.

The issue of technical skills and expertise is also a concern for the voluntary organisations.

Planning and Community

Sustained participation of women and marginalised groups in decision making and implementation of the plan is an important area of concern. Their participation happens by and large only as long as the positive planned interventions take place which are normally promoted by the voluntary organisations.

People have become so used to the idea of top down planning that they do not wish to get involved in a process unless they can see some direct gain from it. Furthermore, those people who already have access to resources and services do not want or try to control the participatory planning which take into account the concerns of the poor and the marginalised.

Access to information and resources is an issue of deep concern given the fact that it is controlled by the dominant caste or class and in both cases, women have minimum access.

Traditional practices and beliefs of various groups living in the villages and their varying priorities make it very difficult to prioritise issues.

Recommendations

1. The process of participatory planning makes it necessary that there be some mechanisms besides the mandatory gram sabha meetings for enabling the people to make the plan. In this regard it is suggested that the concept of participatory planning be promoted through ward level meetings for which the ward representatives are held accountable. This would also promote participation of women and marginalised communities thus reflecting their concerns in the plan.

2. Availability of flexible funds for the implementation of plans at the gram panchayat level is a crucial issue, information about the allocation of funds under the government schemes should be made

available to the gram panchayat and die other tiers as well at the beginning of the financial year. The allocated money should then be released within a given time frame.

3. Collection of taxes by all the three tiers should be made compulsory, corresponding administrative powers should be transferred to the three tiers at the earliest This will work as an incentive for planning as well because dependency on government funds for the implementation of plans will be reduced.

4. Opportunities for learning through sharing of experiences amongst various groups should be promoted. In this regard exposure visits of representatives to IUUS or panchayats that are functioning effectively can be undertaken. Social events and public gatherings such as melas are effective opportunities where people from multiple backgrounds can get together. share their experiences and learn from each other. .

5. To strengthen the capacities of gram panchayats in planning processes specialised trainings or orientation programmes should be organised. As the government officials and functionaries will be instrumental in promoting participatory planning their orientation is also important to enable them to 'adapt' their functioning for decentralised governance.

6. Information related to various schemes, available resources (internal and externally). technical know-how on issues of planning should be made available and accessible at each tier. Village Information Centres should be established where the data related to such information can be made available.

7. Linkages within the three tiers should be promoted through laying of rules that make it essential for the block and district tiers as well as administrative tiers at corresponding levels to respond to the proposals sent forth by the grain panchayats within a given timeframe.

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