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# Realising the Potential of Panchayats for Community Empowerment

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# Summary

- Future is in panchayats
- At present, they are functioning far below their potential
- Several policy measures need to be taken to increase their effectiveness
- Simultaneous steps are needed in improving the role of administration and redefining the role of MLAs/MPs

# What is the problem?

- Public services do not reach the poor
- Weak accountability & absence of monitoring
- Large scale leakages
- Women and poor are not included in decision making processes, they are dis-empowered

*How have panchayats fared in addressing these issues?*

# Why community empowerment?

- Water, forests & uncultivated lands are common property
- Productivity of private resources in a watershed depends on decisions of many
- Implementation of health and education programmes requires community participation
- Control of community over local government functionaries will improve their accountability
- Disadvantaged people derive more benefit from group rather than individual based approach

*Empowerment should be conceptualised as a strategy as well as a goal*

# An ideal panchayat should be

- Effective
- Provide sustained benefits
- People should identify themselves with it
- Poor, esp. women, should feel included
- Transparent decision making
- Minimum corruption
- Look after common property

# Panchayats in UP

- Regular meetings not held
- In almost all cases, Pradhans, VDOs and middlemen decided the list of beneficiaries
- Thumb impression of females taken after the meetings
- Out of 4 women led panchayats, only in one case the lady Pradhan was active, elsewhere the husbands performed all functions
- SC Pradhans acted as rubber stamps for upper caste people
- Weaker pradhans were less autocratic and relied more on community support

# Ranking different organisations in Dungarpur

- Participatory Approach to Human and Land Resource Development (PAHAL)
- Shiksha Karmi and Lok Jumbish - education
- Women's savings group
- Farmer's Cooperative Society
- Gram Panchayat

*Panchayats were least popular, other NGO led organisations were considered more useful and helpful to the people*

# Disappointing performance of PRIs

- Meetings of the Gram Sabha are held rarely
- Harassment by Block level officials - they control funds
- Lack of transparency – muster rolls never shown to anybody
- Huge amounts spent in elections.
- Despite excellent work by some village level panchayats, many panchayat elected leaders (esp. at block/district level) as well as the officials see in development programmes an opportunity to earn commission

# Implications of construction fixation

- SGRY and other similar construction oriented schemes require a contractor and wage labour
- These do not require participation at equal terms
- Panchayat activities get reduced to collusion between Sarpanch and block staff
- Flow of funds from district/ GOI not dependent on good work or mobilisation

*Panchayats are not active in education, health, SHGs, watershed, pastures and forestry programmes, which require people to come together as equals*

# 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment - Inadequacies

- Power & functions of Gram Sabha not defined.
- Actual devolution of powers to panchayats left to the discretion of the State Governments.
- The expression 'institution of self government' not elaborated
- Re-election is not dependent on the good work done by the office bearer

# Some inadequacies of State Acts

- Most States view PRIs as agents
- No autonomy to PRIs to function as institutions of self government
- Control still exercised by bureaucracy
- Political reluctance to give up control over implementation and funds

# Scheduled Areas Act, 1996

## Village council to:

- Approve development plans
- Select beneficiaries under various programmes
- Control minor forest produce
- Manage minor water bodies
- Be consulted in land acquisition
- Control minor mineral leases
- Control institutions and functionaries in all social sectors

# Scheduled Areas Act largely ignored by the States

- MFPs are to be owned by panchayats & Gram Sabha but several MFPs are still 'nationalised';
- ownership of MFPs subjected to existing laws, such as Maharashtra Forest Produce Act, 1997
- Consultation for land acquisition in Orissa, Andhra & Gujarat is not with village panchayat or Gram Sabha
- Provisions regarding minor minerals, village markets and village plans diluted in many states

Should the panchayats get a share in taxes or the right to levy and collect taxes? The correct approach would be to provide PRIs with revenue raising powers of their own in order to reduce their excessive dependence on the State and Central Governments. PRIs also hesitate to levy and collect taxes.

# People should contribute to panchayat funds

- They develop a sense of ownership
- They then demand better quality
- Leads to transparency
- Fund could be used for maintenance
- Reduces financial burden on government

*Therefore GOI should give matching funds when people contribute*

<u>State</u>	<u>Villages per Panchayat</u>
Haryana	1.2
Tripura	1.2
Kerala	1.2
Punjab	1.2
Delhi	1.3
Gujarat	1.4
Andhra Pradesh	1.5
Uttar Pradesh	1.5
Maharashtra	1.6
Sikkim	2.9

<u>State</u>	<u>Villages per Panchayat</u>
Arunachal	4.0
Madhya Pradesh	4.1
Jammu & Kashmir	4.7
Rajasthan	5.1
Bihar	6.6
Himachal Pradesh	7.3
West Bengal	11.7
Orissa	11.8
Assam	29.1
All-India	2.8

# User Groups vs. Panchayats

- Panchayats cover many villages and ignore small villages
- Panchayats interested in patronage, not participation
- Panchayats based on conflict, development requires consensus
- User Groups create a broader leadership base and provide an opportunity for more people to be involved in decision making
- Social capital in either case hardly with the poor

# User Groups vs. Panchayats

- Panchayats are statutory bodies, User Groups are short-lived
- Panchayats interact with many depts., User Groups only with funding department
- Panchayats give representation to women/ SCs/ STs, user groups may not
- More cost effective for PRIs to be the apex linking body
- Bureaucracy favours User Groups as they are more amenable to bureaucratic controls than the panchayats
- Strong institutional links between User Groups and Panchayats in Kerala

# Panchayats vs. User Groups

Both may lack capacity for sustained action

- Pressure to spend substantial resources by a fixed deadline
- Limited time permitted for preparatory and group formation activities
- Poor maintenance
- Self-help groups should be formed among the actual users that should serve as the building blocks of community decision making
- This approach has high resource requirements, as external agents need to interact with the communities for extended period of time

# Panchayats, CBOs, NGOs

- Cannot be substitute for regular administration
- Roles are complementary
- Main issue is accountability
- Build up upward, downward, and sideways accountability

*Is it possible to improve panchayats without improving district politics or district administration?*

# Capacity building of panchayats

- Transfer taxation powers
- Link devolution with their performance & with transfer of powers
- Encourage peer review & stakeholder audit
- Grade panchayats & give untied funds to the best
- Increase their powers and responsibilities in education, health, watershed, and pastures
- Make village panchayats appointing authorities for education & health staff
- Connect the three tiers

*What role for MLAs?*

*Do we really require three tiers?*

**Thank you**