

# Capacity Building for Effective Local Self-Governance

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*Capacity is a Multi Dimensional and complex attribute. Some of these attributes may be awareness, knowledge, skill, self-confidence and actions. Building these attributes has become a need and integral part in the functioning of any system of governance. This article traces the trend in Capacity Building, its conceptual understanding, its present demand and supply in strengthening the Local Self Governance.*

## Context:

Nearly 88 countries of the world have begun to promote some form of decentralised local government in the past 5-10 years. Despite enormous variation across the countries and regions, two common elements of this decentralised local government are:

1. Some form of regular election to local level bodies with elected representative council for a village or town;
2. Specific administrative and financial devolution to these elected local bodies for undertaking and managing programmes of local development.

In South Asia, this trend began in the early 1990s. In India, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments brought in 1993 provided the Constitutional framework for constituting such local bodies. The provision in these amendments have some far reaching implications with respect to the governance of local areas in rural and urban centres. By providing 1/3rd reservation for women and proportionate reservation for other socially excluded and deprived sections (tribals, dalits, etc.), the Constitutional framework for local bodies in India has an enormous affirmative action potential.

The experience of functioning of these local bodies in the past 6-7 years in India makes it clear that effective local self governance is still a distant dream and requires enormous interventions to realise its potential<sup>1</sup>.

However, the complexity of the situation demands a broader understanding of the methodologies for capacity building. This paper presents our perspectives on the same, based on our experience during the last 5 years.

## Meaning of Capacity Building :

Capacity can be defined as the totality of inputs needed by an actor to realise its purposes<sup>2</sup>. Applied to local bodies, this will ensure that such institutions are able to function effectively as institutions of local self governance in the perspective elaborated above.

Capacity of such institutions can also be seen in three distinct though inter-related aspects:

- a) **Intellectual Capacity:** This implies capacity to think, reflect and analyse reality independently and in pursuit of self defined purposes of local self-governance.
- b) **Institutional Capacity:** This implies procedures, systems, structure, staffing, decision-making, transparency and accountability, planning, implementation and monitoring. It also includes mechanisms for building linkages with others.
- c) **Material Capacity:** This includes material resources, physical assets, funds, ability, systems and procedures to mobilise revenues; and access and control over physical and natural resources and infrastructure; systems and procedures required for adequate management of funds and such infrastructure.

Viewed in the above sense, capacity of a development actor or a local body means an examination of its purposes at a given period of its life cycle. The capacity building needs change over time.

One of the consequences of the above is an acknowledgement of diversity and temporal dynamism in the requirements of capacity for any development actor.

What then is Capacity Building? Invariably, training of individuals is seen as the sine-qua-non of capacity building through some pre-determined package of inputs. However, capacity building comprises of a variety of other approaches and processes. Organisational strengthening, institutional learning, field exposure and projects, horizontal sharing and

<sup>1</sup> *Future Capacity Building of Southern NGOs, 1998, IFCB Founding Conference in Brussels.*

<sup>2</sup> *Capacity Building in Civil Society, 1997, Paper presented by Dr. Rajesh Tandon at Support Organisation meeting in Harare.*

solidarity are some of the other illustrations of practical, on-the-job and experiential learning processes to capacity building.

Viewed in this sense, capacity building is a long-term process of strengthening an actor (or a local body) based on systematic learning of new knowledge, skills and attitudes<sup>4</sup>. Like all learning, the actor herself must see the value of and take responsibility for that learning. This capacity building can not be imposed from outside. Preparation of the actor (or a local body) to identify its particular capacity needs and motivation to take responsibility for learning those is a major part of capacity building intervention in such a framework.

This does not imply that external interventions have no role in capacity building. There are many:

- Preparation of the actor (or a local body) in terms of external stimulation and intervention.
- Providing opportunities for systematic learning and facilitating such learning.
- Accessing and making available resources for capacity enhancement
- Supporting on-going and sustained capacity enhancement over a long-term.

In this framework, capacity building efforts address needs for enhancing capacity at the level of individual and organised collectives.

In the framework presented above, different elements and processes of capacity building for local self-governance in the Indian context are elaborated and illustrated.

### System of Local Governance :

Through Constitutional Amendments, the system of local self-governance established in India has the following broad features:

1. There are 3 tiers of elected bodies in rural areas - Gram Panchayat (GP) at the village level; Panchayat Samiti (PS), at the block level and Zilla Parishad (ZP) at the district level.
2. The village assembly of all adult voters is identified as Gram Sabha
3. At all tiers of elected representatives, 1/3rd of all seats is reserved for women. Like-wise, reservation for socially oppressed (dalits and tribals) has also been mandated.

<sup>4</sup> Future Capacity Building of Southern NGOs, 1998, IFCB Founding Conference in Brussels.

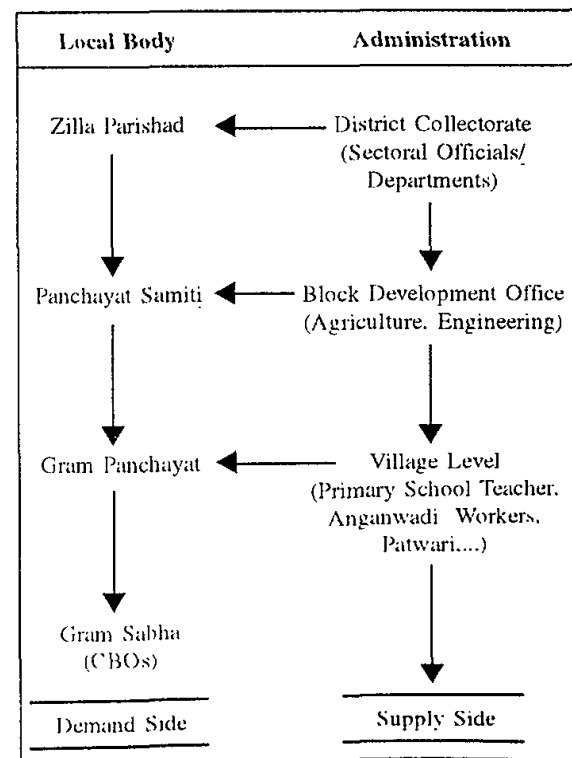
4. Regular elections every 5 years have been constitutionally mandated.
5. The Constitution lists a number of development areas for which the three tiers of the local bodies have responsibility.
6. Finance Commissions have been constitutionally required to allocate budgetary resources and the power for mobilising revenue to local bodies.

In a vast country like India, this democratic decentralisation has enormous challenge. In rural areas, nearly a quarter million local bodies exist. Nearly three million elected representatives are there in these local bodies, of which nearly one million are women.

### Capacity Building for Local Governance :

PRIA's focus of interventions to strengthen local self governance have targeted the lowest tier of this structure<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the interventions aimed at capacity building have largely been of two varieties: demand and supply. Figure 1 provides a schematic overview of the system of local governance and its demand-supply linkages.

**Figure 1 : Tiers of Local Body and Administration**



<sup>4</sup> The Challenges in Capacity Building : Support Organisation in South Asia, 1999, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

## A. Strengthening Demand :

Effective functioning of local self-governance requires active, engaged and organised citizenry. In the practical context of today's reality, families and communities have been increasingly divided around caste, religion, ethnicity and gender. Therefore, the most significant intervention needed is to strengthen Gram Sabha as contemporary civil society formation in each hamlet and village.

1. Capacity enhancement interventions at this level would entail an appreciation of the collective identity of Gram Sabha. Such an intellectual preparation requires inculcating a perspective of collective citizenship as the basis of civil society. PRIA's efforts at mobilising individuals and families in a hamlet or a village to work together to address common problems at the village level has been inspired by this approach.
2. A strong Gram Sabha also requires institutional mechanism to function effectively. It requires effective conduct of periodical (quarterly or six monthly) Gram Sabha meetings where development planning at the local level as well as monitoring of implementation could be undertaken to enable the Gram Sabha (including acquiring further legitimacy constitutionally) to operate as the basic unit of collective decision-making in common public good.
3. There have existed many informal local community based associations in these villages. Some of them are traditional associations around caste or kinship, cultural- religious associations, etc. In recent years, many government or NGO development programmes have also catalysed formation of new associations like self-help-groups, mahila mandals (women's groups), youth groups, village education committee, forest protection committee, watershed committee, etc.

A significant aspect of strengthening local demand system is to build the capacity of these traditional and contemporary local associations<sup>5</sup>.

PRIA's interventions at this level have largely attempted to enhance their intellectual capacity to share the perspective of local governance. This enables these traditional and contemporary local associations to work in synergy with the Gram Panchayat and the Gram Sabha.

<sup>5</sup> *Enter the New Millennium, 1999, PRIA*

4. The elected representatives of Gram Panchayat (numbering between 7-11 members), represent a small hamlet or village. In addition, there is a Sarpanch - elected as Chief of Gram Panchayat directly by all members of Gram Sabha. In some ways, this body is the first and most direct representative body of local self-governance. However, Gram Panchayat as a vehicle for exercising representative leadership with transparency and accountability to Gram Sabha is a distant ideal.

- a) To understand the autonomous and basic democratic nature of Gram Panchayat as a collective decision-making body, most significant interventions have focused on preparing this collective identity. Such interventions have aimed at developing a common perspective and intellectual appreciation of the Gram Panchayat.
- b) The second set of interventions aimed at Gram Panchayat is their institutional mechanism to function as transparent and accountable local body. This includes mechanisms for conducting meetings, preparing minutes, sharing information with Gram Sabha, securing participation and contribution of Gram Sabha, developing participatory micro plans, procedures and systems, effective implementation and monitoring of these plans, securing and mobilising resources and maintaining transparent systems of financial management, etc.
- c) The capacity building intervention at this level also needs to address the question of enhancing the material base of Gram Panchayat to make them financially autonomous and sustainable entities.

Capacity enhancement interventions in this area particularly focus on mobilising local resources from the village.

5. Perhaps, the most significant interventions in capacity enhancement at this level need to focus on building individual leadership of each of the elected representatives. This is particularly relevant for women, dalits and tribals. Political participation in public space is being experienced by these newly elected leaders for the first time in their life. Thus, enhancing their leadership roles requires capacity enhancement in several ways:
  - a) Access to authentic information about the system of local governance, their roles and

responsibilities and financial resources available to them are the first and foremost requirement. Capacity building for these literate and semi-literate constituencies such as women, dalits and tribals, requires methodological innovations in audio-visuals, folk forms, etc. to be carried out in different settings.

b) Most of these elected women have not left their house or hamlet ever before. Therefore, opportunities for homogenous groups of women, dalits and tribal to share their experiences, express solidarity and provide mutual support need to be created. It is in this context that exposure visits for groups of elected representatives, joint camps and big sammelans (Conferences) have been utilised as innovative approaches to building self-confidence for the elected leadership.

c) Exercising new leadership also requires learning new skills. These skills include how to conduct a meeting, how to prepare minutes, how to prepare village plans, how to manage funds, etc. Learning these skills through training, practical demonstration and hand-holding needs to be promoted.

Therefore, capacity enhancement interventions aimed at individual strengthening and empowerment of new leaders is a fundamental challenge in local governance.

6. Given different tiers of local bodies, vertical linkages across them need to be strengthened.
7. One of the most significant areas of strengthening is to enable horizontal linkages between different tiers of local bodies and commensurate tiers of local administration. These include primary school teachers, village level workers, Aanganwadi workers, multi-purpose health workers, forest guards, police hawaldars (constables), etc.

According to constitutional provision, all the above mentioned government functionaries should be accountable to Gram Panchayat. However, this is not a reality anywhere in India so far. Gram Panchayat needs to learn how to assert their rights and supervision over the concerned government functionaries and relevant government development programmes and resources. Structured learning opportunities need to be created separately for Gram Panchayat, as well as jointly with concerned government officials and their supervisors.

8. Another area of horizontal networking is building relationships and support mechanisms with other elected representatives in neighbouring villages, blocks and districts. Support towards building such horizontal networks as bottom-up pressure groups and mutual support mechanisms are a major challenge of capacity building in local governance.

## B. Strengthening Supply:

Another aspect of building capacity is to influence and enhance the supply side in local governance.

1. Orientation and attitudinal change for government functionaries at all levels is a major challenge in working with responsive and accountable bureaucracy. A primary vehicle for bringing this about is through civil service training institutions at the district, state and national levels. This may imply improving pedagogy and quality of facilitators in such government civil service training institutions.
2. The second area of capacity enhancement for government functionaries has to do with specific skills that they may need to work with Panchayati Raj Institutions. For example, in the system of top-down development interventions, lowest level government officials have no skill in planning and monitoring since all of that has been centralised. They need to learn skills in promoting micro plans (including budgeting) as well as social audit and community monitoring of implementation of these plans.
3. Sensitisation and attitudinal changes are also a major arena of capacity enhancement for political leadership at all levels. Barring a few individuals, the political culture in most political parties and among active and elected politicians is one of the disregard for the activities and motivations of ordinary people to take responsibility for village level development. Carefully selected communication strategies, meetings, dialogues and workshops could be utilised for such capacity enhancement interventions.
4. Another aspect of supply side is intermediary development NGOs. Most of them have a package of development programmes, which they implement in various villages. Orientation and sensitisation of these intermediary NGOs to work through Panchayats and the Gram Sabha is a necessary challenge of capacity enhancement. PRIA and its partners' interventions have reached out to more than 500 such NGOs in the country. Yet, there are many more who are neither

convinced about the significance of local government nor willing to change their approaches and programmes to respond to them.

5. Capacity enhancement interventions are most urgently needed to sensitise and re-orient donors. Despite general discussions, concrete shifts in donor policies, resources and programmes towards strengthening institutions of local governance is yet to take place.
6. Finally there is a vast arena of public education for society at large so that different individuals and institutions such as the media, academic institutions, youth groups, human rights organisations and others who need to be sensitised and oriented to the challenges faced by local bodies in building their capacities to accomplish their constitutionally mandated purposes.

To ensure the match between strengthening the demand side and responsiveness of supply side is a challenge in the present context. This is particularly so when demand generates heightened levels of expectations which are not adequately responded to by the supply side.

#### **Conclusion:**

The above narrative describes the challenges facing effective development for effective local self-governance. Bulk of this capacity focuses on

promoting participation in local public institutions. Obstacles to such participation are cultural, systemic, institutional and human. Thus, inclusion of the marginalised is a primary challenge of capacity enhancement interventions.

Local governance can be made more transparent and accountable to local community only if civil society assertions are coherent and persistent. The interface between strong civil society and effective local governance can be secured more organically if capacity building interventions are properly designed and implemented.

Changing attitudes and beliefs is at the very heart of democratic functioning. This implies a culture of dialogue, consultation and consensus building. These values and processes need to be nurtured through sustained capacity enhancement interventions.

Intensive documentation of these interventions is a necessary first step. Sharing of innovations and experiments and best practices is an important part of this effort.

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*Rajesh Tandon is the President of PRIA. The above paper was presented on behalf of IFCB for the INTERACTION FORUM meeting during April 17-18, 2000 at Washington D.C. The full-length paper is available with PRIA.*