

Knowledge Management for Participatory Planning at the Grassroots: Dimensions, Prospects and Issues

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ABSTRACT

Rural democratization has emerged as a plausible approach towards political and economic empowerment of rural communities in several developing economies. Democratization process at the grassroots level, duly facilitated by rural institutions with adequate financial and physical endowments, is being regarded as a conduit of faster socio economic development, with transparency and accountability. India has witnessed drastic changes in rural democratization since the enactment of 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. However, different states are at different stages of democratic decentralization. Kerala, the southernmost state of India has utilized the provisions of democratic decentralization for ensuring people's participation in planning grassroots level development programmes. Since development planning involves multitude of knowledge components, several mechanisms of knowledge sharing and dissemination have been evolved at the grassroots level by local ingenuity. Knowledge generated by the synergetic functions of various stakeholders has been disseminated among communities across the state. Understanding the ways by which communities generate, share and preserve the tacit knowledge of institution building and programme planning would lead to sustainable efforts on food security, livelihood security etc. This paper examines the dynamics of knowledge generation and dissemination among rural communities in the context of rural democratization. The paper closely observes a few development innovations in agriculture and food security by local self government institutions and finds out the typology of knowledge generated and disseminated thereof. Various dimensions of participatory planning programme vis- a vis conventional modes of development have also been delineated and discussed. The wide spectrum of issues addressed in the course of development planning has opened up new solutions and successful experiences on decentralized planning from across the state have led to substantial learning by people's representatives and development activists. This has also led to a new kind of institutional learning about ways of better management of the human, technical, financial, and natural resources for sustainable local economic development.

Key words : Rural democratization; Political and economic empowerment; Democratization process;

Rural democratization is being increasingly regarded as a plausible approach towards political and economic empowerment of rural communities in several developing economies. Experiences from across the country reiterate that democratization duly facilitated by rural institutions with adequate financial and physical endowments would be a far more efficient conduit for socio economic development.

However, the process of rural democratization is so intricate that it has to be preceded by fundamental transformation in various institutions and processes at the grassroots level for tangible outputs. It is a long and

difficult process that involves struggles to build rural, social and political organizations capable of representing the diverse interests of the rural poor and amplifying their voices in the formulation of public policy. In the emerging contexts, it involves initiatives to increase accountability of the state to the marginalized members of the rural population (Franco, 2008). It also implies such capacities of the people that enable them to determine on just and equal terms the institutional policies that affect their every day lives. Acute voicelessness of the rural poor in matters related to their development (IFAD, 2003) requires 'participation' to

broaden its scope by means of the urge and ability to know, comprehend, deliberate, and act upon the policy issues of governance (*Bhattacharya, 2007*).

The praxis of rural democratization involves definite procedures for devolving financial and administrative authority to grassroots level democratic institutions and an overhauling of the existing modes of development administration. It should also be accompanied by vibrant and pro-poor public action, and earnest attempts to sustain them (*Ribot, 2002*). The conventional clientelism in the notion of 'development intervention' should give way to 'effective participation of stakeholders'. Several vignettes of this kind are being reported from across the world at the behest of governments as well as voluntary organizations.

These challenges make rural democratization fairly complex and knowledge intensive. The process requires varied knowledge at different levels to reorient the existing system and to make the new system operational. Knowledge generated and used by the actors-both individuals and institutions-during the course of democratization would be a major determinant of its sustainability (*Davenport and Prusak, 1998*). It seems that a close look at the generation and dissemination of various forms of knowledge - explicit and implicit-in the complex praxis of rural democratization would be of great significance in contextualizing the approaches to grass roots level development. This paper attempts to understand the typology of knowledge generated in the rural democratization programme underway in Kerala, particularly with regard to the process of participatory planning practiced by local self government institutions.

METHODOLOGY

The backdrop of rural democratization in Kerala has been described by drawing inputs from secondary sources like the guidelines of the state planning board, administrative reports and the plan documents maintained by the local self government institutions. The typology of knowledge involved in the process has been observed with special reference to the tacit knowledge evolved in the course of planning and implementing local development projects. This has been explored by interacting with the major stakeholders of ten beacon projects selected for the study. The respondents included people's representatives, officials and beneficiaries of the programme. Ten beacon initiatives were selected on the basis of consensus expressed by a group of experts engaged for evaluating the best performance

of local self governments in Kerala during 2006-2010. These initiatives were examined in detail for innovations in institutional arrangements, which could eventually form the knowledge base required for the praxis of rural democratization.

Rural Democratization in Kerala: Features and Processes: The domestic legislation for democratic decentralization in Kerala has provisions to empower the three tier system of local governance by devolving adequate administrative authorities and financial resources. This also entails the strategy of institutionalizing rural democratization through a well defined mechanism to draw up local level development plans through a series of participatory and iterative interactions among stakeholders. Moreover, this paradigm defines new dimensions of the role of the state in facilitating grassroots level development and explains how best it could be done by involving people. It also suggests new ways of harnessing resources and developing synergies at the local level.

Several drastic changes in the functioning of development departments at the grassroots level have also been envisioned. About 12 development agencies have been transferred to the three tier local self government institutions for making local governance effective. More importantly, the legislation provided scope for drawing up local level development plans with high degree of people's participation, the details of which are explained below:

Institutional Mechanisms for Formulating Local Development Plans : The general framework of institutional arrangements essentially include fiscal decentralization, devolution of authority to grassroots level institutions, empowerment of democratic structures for people's participation and stakeholder consultation, integration of development departments in the process of local level planning. There are also well defined parameters for selection of beneficiaries, monitoring progress and evaluating the physical and financial accomplishments of projects (*Vijayanand, 2009*).

The methodology for planning for local level development got evolved in the state through a series of deliberations among stakeholders and drawing richly from the experiences of pilot experiments on grassroots level planning undertaken at various parts of the state (*Issac and Franke, 2002*). The structure and functions of LSGIs have been reoriented to facilitate decentralized planning, implementation and monitoring, through certain discrete steps as given below.

- Felt needs of people in various development sectors are identified in a meeting of the neighbourhood groups and subsequently aired in the village council (*grama sabha*), which includes all the adult citizens of the ward in a local body. Village council segregates into different groups and hold deliberations on a given development sector, based on a status paper prepared by a *working group* on the sector. The status paper essentially contains the details of various development plans, target groups, physical and financial accomplishments, gaps, opportunities etc. The *working group* is a resource group at the local level that would facilitate the planning process in a development sector. Each working group is headed by an elected member and is convened by the implementing officer of the concerned department.
- The reflections of the village council and the draft project proposals would be consolidated in a village level '*development seminar*', which is attended by experts, elected members, representatives nominated by *grama sabhas* etc. The seminar suggests broad priorities and general strategies of the developmental projects to be implemented in the local body.
- The ideas thrown up by various stakeholders during the above stages are translated into implementable *projects* as per the standards and criteria stipulated by the State Planning Board, which lays down the broad framework for fund utilization and priorities of the state every year. Projects are made by working groups at the LSGI level.
- This is followed by a process of appraisal and approval of the projects by a more competitive body of experts namely *Technical Advisory Group* (TAG) at the next higher level of the LSGIs. This is to examine the feasibility and practicability of the projects and ensure compliance with guidelines. Technical Advisory Groups are constituted by experts of the concerned field including the officials of development departments, volunteers and proactive social workers associated with the programme. Subsequently, a set of projects formulated in different sectors is submitted to the District Planning Committee (DPC) for final approval. LSGI implement the projects on getting formal approval from DPC. Neither the TAG nor the DPC is entitled to change the priorities of the

LSGI. The autonomy espoused in the principles of decentralization is reiterated in this process.

- This process has been volunteered and assisted by a number of proactive resource persons drawn from various development departments, people's science movements, local level NGOs and other community based organizations. Obviously, the programme demands a synergy among these key actors such as the political leadership, band of voluntary resource persons, and the government officials who are officially responsible for implementing the projects. It enables public scrutiny of the progress of a developmental project, as it is monitored at several levels: at the official level by means of periodic reporting and at the people's level by the *grama sabha*. Direct examination by monitoring committees formed at the local body also scrutinizes the implementation process.

Background and description of the beacon projects selected for the study : The study closely examined ten initiatives in agricultural sector that have been proposed with the aim of enhancing production and accomplishing food security. These proposals have been mooted in the context of the dwindling food grain production in the state (GOK, 2009). To combat this, the state has adopted a strategy of facilitating local self government institutions to draw up integrated development projects in agriculture and allied sectors. The strategy also included harnessing local resources, integrating the efforts of line departments and mobilizing community action for food security. The details of the beacon projects that have been selected for analysis is given in Table 1.

Implementation of these projects has made use of the institutional arrangements that have been established as part of decentralization. However, instead of mere mechanical adoption of a set procedure, the focus was on making use of the freedom of choice and local wisdom in designing location specific programmes. The local self government institutions have come up with innovations to address various issues related to agricultural production and productivity. All these interventions involved community mobilization and resolution of conflicts among various stakeholders. Several best practices that could contribute to the knowledge base on participatory planning and local economic development have resulted from these programmes.

Table 1. Beacon development initiatives selected for the study

S.No.	Description of the project	Location (village)	Description of programme objectives
1	Revival of paddy cultivation	Meppady, Kozhikkode	Vast stretch of rice land that has remained fallow for more than a decade has been reclaimed for paddy cultivation
2	Watershed development	Pudussery, Palakkad	Extensive watershed development programme under the auspices of the local body and volunteer groups
3	Sustainable food grain production	Narikkuni, Kozhikkode	Sustainable means of rice production adopted by a federation of self help groups funded by the local self government institutions
4	Community seed production	Pariyaram, Kannur	Enhancing profitability of farmers by concentrating on quality seed production
5	Women SHGs in rice production	Thenkara, Palakkad	Women SHGs were trained in rice cultivation including mechanization and post harvest handling
6	<i>Susthira</i> Sustainable Development programme	Kodakara, Thrissur	Integration of all state sponsored and centrally sponsored schemes with the locally drawn development programmes of local self government institutions
7	Fallow free village	Mannachery, Alappuzha	All the cultivable rice fields that had been abandoned for decades have been utilized for sustainable food grain production
8	Community nurseries for traditional varieties	Mararikkulam North, Alappuzha	Planting materials of traditional varieties of vegetables and tubers were produced on a massive scale to supply seeds to neighbouring villages at premier prices
9	Precision farming through SHGs	Perumatty, Palakkad	Intensification of production and productivity by vegetable cultivators through precision farming and protected cultivation
10	Integrated projects	Ezhome, Kannur	Integration of the use of available natural resources with a view to of rice and fish culture enhance food security for food security

Knowledge generated in the paradigm of rural democratization: This massive rural democratization exercise has led to quite a good number of successful interventions that could be scaled up across the state. These initiatives have also demonstrated the problems and prospects of realizing the synergy of stakeholder groups and institutions in carrying forward democratic decentralization. The explicit and tacit knowledge generated during the positive as well as negative transactions involved in these programmes shall be of use in emulating similar experiences.

These beacon projects showcase the unique local ingenuities put to use in addressing the vital problems that plague conventional modes of development administration. The knowledge on institution building and programme planning generated by the key actors and institutions would help local governments evolve sustainable programmes on vital issues such as food security, livelihood security, environmental protection, transparency, good governance etc. The type of knowledge managed by the local self government institutions include: First, the explicit knowledge on institutionalization of decentralized planning which is

generic and, second, the implicit knowledge specifically used by the stakeholders at various critical stages while implementing the programme.

Discussions with voluntary participants, beneficiaries and officers of the development agencies revealed the typology of knowledge employed in designing and implementing a grassroots level development programme successfully. See Table 2.

Different types of location specific and contextual knowledge on the practice of decentralized planning have been generated from these experiences. The knowledge generated is mostly related to the managerial aspects of plan formulation, resource mobilization and community action. The lessons drawn from these experiences have to be shared among different stakeholders of the programme. However, in response to a query as to whether the knowledge generated in these projects has been employed elsewhere, it was understood that it is not widely known among other local bodies. The inferences have not been collated and synthesized properly. The body of knowledge on the praxis of grassroots level development planning would have been richer with lessons from such experiences.

Table 2. Typology of knowledge generated and used in the process of decentralized planning

S. No	Knowledge generated	Description of components
1.	Modes of mobilizing people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structuring household campaigns and other propaganda • Innovative methods of making people participate
2.	Modes of conducting village councils or <i>Gramasabhas</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization of the meeting • Administration of sessions • Documentation of transactions
3.	Modes of making people reflect on issues candidly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging people to reflect irrespective of one's status • Resolving dominance of interest groups • Harnessing different perspectives
4.	Modes of reaching consensus among people on development issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resolving conflicts • Deriving agreeable propositions
5.	Modes of appraising situations and finding out issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of status reports of various projects • Modes of finding out gaps in various development sectors • Analysis of data • Prioritizing the multitude of demands
6.	Ideation of projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translating people's concerns into project ideas • Linking local level data with projects suggested • Identifying project components
7.	Projectisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting tangible objectives • Deciding on the modes of implementation of projects • Consultation with agencies to be engaged
8.	Mobilization of own funds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding out means of own resources • Enhancing the efficacy of the mechanisms for realizing own income
9.	Modes of integration of funds from various sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pattern of integration of funds from different sources for the implementation of projects • Streamlining the diverse conditions of various funding agencies for seamless implementation of projects
10.	Modes of stakeholder consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying stakeholders • Mapping the relative functions and importance of stakeholders • Modes of stakeholder consultation
11.	Modes of credit linkage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different schemes of financial institutions and their suitability to get integrated with a project • Devising the project so as to avail credit • Encouraging financial institutions to lend and invest
12.	Ensuring the technical, financial and social feasibility of projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factors affecting the technical, financial and social feasibility • Indicators of technical, financial and social feasibility
13.	Expediting the process of project approval	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes and criteria of easier and faster project approval
14.	Modes of implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suitability of the agencies for implementation
15.	Modes of establishing linkages among development agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues in establishing inter agency linkages • Feasible methods of establishing functional linkages among development agencies
16.	Ensuring participation of beneficiaries and stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods of motivating beneficiaries and stakeholders • Methods of ensuring sustainable participation • Method of ensuring representation of all sections of society • Avoiding conflicts
17.	Ways of resolving issues in beneficiary selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devising the criteria of selection • Value chains of different products and services and interventions at various stages • Modes of complying with the criteria of beneficiary selection

18.	Human resource development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods of identifying the skill sets and the gaps in the capabilities of functionaries and beneficiaries to undertake a project • Deciding the content and the mode of administration of HRD programmes • Appraising the effectiveness of HRD programme
19.	Technological options for solving practical problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technological solutions to field problems • Appraising the feasibility of technologies • Scale of operations of technological options
20.	Modes of ensuring integration across parallel organizations/agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resolving functional problems in the integration of institutions for the projects' objectives • Resolving functional problems in the vertical integration of various hierarchical positions within an organization
21.	Modes of managing beneficiary groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustaining the efforts of beneficiary groups • Modes of fixing up the structure of user fee
22.	Modes of monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Techniques of monitoring • Phases of monitoring • Corrective measures
23.	Modes of evaluation of the out puts envisaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deciding on the methods of measuring the outputs of a project • Modes of auditing performance
24.	Modes of establishing effective linkages across local self governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Means of effective consultation with local self governments at different tiers for integrating funds and other resources • Means of instituting effective joint management mechanisms
25.	Modes of ensuring sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods of devising self driven beneficiary groups for sustaining an effort • Formulating the revenue model for sustaining the initiatives • Identifying and supporting the drivers of sustainability
26.	Modes of enhancing marketability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding out the prospects of market access • Devising marketing channels and promotional mechanisms • Mapping the capabilities of producers/entrepreneurs for enhancing the marketability of goods and services
27.	Modes of ensuring community participation for sustainable management of assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance of assets • Modes of ensuring community

Contributions to the praxis of community action under democratic decentralization: The major contribution of this approach is the innovative institutional arrangement for delegation of powers, community participation and effective human resource management. Empowerment of the masses by effectively using the participatory structures is another contribution, which would also require some pre requisites. Scope for appropriate technology choices for specific location, linkages with implementing agencies and credit sources, mechanisms for joint management of operations, measures to ensure sustainability; proactive stakeholder participation, transparency etc have been the offshoots of democratic decentralization. All these have opened up new insights into the set of practices for community action under democratic decentralization. This new approach extends the

possibility of extending the role of the state in a pro-people manner, which entails a new model of public funded extension. The participatory mode of decentralized planning is a significant departure from the conventional modes of development administration usually followed in the public sector. This also is a pointer to the new possibilities of re orienting public funded extension by enhancing transparency and responsibility. Moreover, the issue of empowerment in all its nuances could be more effectively addressed through participatory planning. Experiences show that rural resources could be effectively harnessed and utilized by providing reliable state support for people's participation. Most importantly, each dimension of development planning mentioned above requires abundant knowledge that has to be created at the local level and integrated into the general understanding about

the practice of democratic decentralization. It involves strategies to address critical situations in the process of resource mobilization, community participation and delivery of services.

CONCLUSION

The wide spectrum of issues addressed in the course of participatory planning under the framework of democratic decentralization has opened up new directions for resolving many of the inherent incapacities of the development administration in the country. Experiences on decentralized planning from across the state have led to substantial learning by people's representatives and development activists. This has also

led to a new genre of institutional learning leading to better management of human, technical, financial and natural resources. More importantly, these experiences give directions towards the new modes of empowering communities hailing from different socio economic strata. However, there a lot of things which remain to be resolved before this mechanism get on to rails properly. The praxis of rural democratization needs to be strengthened through comprehensive learning by all the stakeholders, as it puts forward multitude of possibilities for sustainable development at the grassroots level.

Paper received on : November 01, 2011

Accepted on : December 30, 2011

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