

BLOCK 5

DECENTRALISATION: ADMINISTRATION OF DEVELOPMENT AT GRASS ROOTS



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UNIT 9 DECENTRALISATION: ADMINISTRATION OF DEVELOPMENT AT GRASSROOTS

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Infer the relevance of decentralisation in grassroots development;
- Discuss the role of grassroots development actors;
- Explain the role of Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committee in meeting community health needs; and
- Describe the significance of School Management Committee/Village Education Committee in improving school education at the village level.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Decentralisation refers to the transfer of authority, responsibility, and resources from the national government to sub-national governments. Sub-national governments include local governments, both urban and rural. Decentralisation attempts to establish public accountability among national, state and local governments. In the process of decentralisation, the local government needs to be well-equipped with adequate trained staff as without them decentralisation would stay only in paper and not in spirit. According to Bhattacharya (2011), decentralisation facilitates local decision-making, heightened popular participation, and grassroots socio-economic development.

Although, decentralisation discourse evolved during 1950s, it was only during mid-1970s that greater emphasis was given on the instrumental nature of decentralisation in enabling local government for nation development. In fact, decentralisation was accorded due recognition by the International Community in the post-Rio Summit (1992) wherein environmentalists asserted that without decentralisation, grassroots empowerment would remain as a distant dream. Thus, decentralisation has been considered as an indispensable instrument in the grassroots management of Common Property Resources (CPR), such as, forests, wetlands, bio-diversity etc. In brief, decentralisation utilises the local human capital, protects local resources and human dignity, self-reliance, innovative people's organisations, and ultimately empowers the grassroots.

In this Unit, you shall study the way development is administered at the grassroots level.

9.2 THE CONTEXT

The focus of decentralisation process is on prioritising the needs of the deprived people and understanding the problems of the deprived people not from beneficiaries' point of view, but on actor's point of view, say for example, rural women, illiterate and poor population. Particularly, at the grassroots, the target group (like the poverty-ridden people) need to be perceived as 'actors' of development and not as mere 'beneficiaries'. Only when they are perceived as actors, participatory avenues would be open for planning, implementation, and evaluation of development programmes. Cumulatively, people's participation in economic, social, and political avenues envisage for holistic human development.

According to Article 40 of the Indian Constitution, the state governments are expected to organise village panchayats and delegate essential powers and authority to function as units of self-government. Various committees were constituted by successive governments between 1950s to 1980s to provide a solid role for local governments in administration of development. With Constitutional status provided to panchayats in 1992 (73rd Constitutional Amendment Act), the local governments have been empowered to resolve grassroots issues and problems. Indeed, under the Eleventh Schedule of the 1992 Act, 29 subjects have been included for local planning and implementing of development programmes. The 29 subjects, to name a few, agriculture, animal husbandry, social forestry, rural housing, poverty alleviation programmes, education (both primary and secondary), health and sanitation, women and child development, public distribution system, maintenance of community assets etc. For perspective, under the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), although the rural employment programme was conceived by the Government of India, it is the panchayats that implement the schemes at the village level. Through MGNREGA, the panchayats can maintain their community assets, improve their village infrastructure, and provide jobs to the unemployed youth.

In grassroots context, while structuring people's participation, Development Administration scholars recommend that administrative authorities and grassroots development actors need to be trained to define the problems vis-a-vis economic, social, and political. Social audit has been made as a mandate for the implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) across India. For instance, social audits are conducted in villages wherein individuals, target groups, and non-State actors get to scrutinise the government programmes that are being implemented. Social audits are grassroots public meetings and is an important element of grassroots advocacy that identifies the gap between the desired and actual impact of development programmes, such as, food, health, employment and social security (Pande, 2021). The term 'audire' (Latin origin) means to hear and it enables government to hear the grievances of the people. Originally, social audits emerged through a grassroots struggle way back in the 1990s in Rajasthan, wherein workers and peasants fought for their right to minimum wages in public work projects. They were mobilised and trained by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) to scrutinise government documents in an open and collective way. In 2022, with the aim to train the actors of development in reviewing official documents and conducting village social audits, the Rajasthan state government collaborated with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). In this regard, a residential training programme was organised for the participants (Times of India, 2022).

Among other Indian states, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are pioneers in conducting social audit for MGNREGA since 2000s. For instance, Telangana had conducted social auditing

across 21,827 panchayats since 2007. In the process, it has also inspired other state governments. In fact, in Jharkhand, social audits have successfully monitored the implementation of key food security, maternal and child nutrition programmes even during the pandemic. In Meghalaya, Community Participation and Public Services Social Audit Law was enacted in 2017 and through this, social audit has been included in 21 social welfare schemes (Pande, 2021).

In the ensuing Section, let us discuss about the development programmes at the grassroots level and the role of local level authorities.

9.3 NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH MISSION

Among the 29 subjects enshrined in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA), one of the subjects to be covered under the panchayats is health. In this regard, the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) was formulated in 2005 to provide accessible, affordable, and quality healthcare to the rural vulnerable population. It is a Mission that intends to promote community-based decentralisation of Primary Health Care (PHC). In fact, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been considered as a significant platform in managing community health as well as health infrastructure. For perspective, NRHM intends to empower PRIs at each level vis-a-vis Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti (Block) and Zilla Parishad (District). One of the core strategies of the Mission is to train and enhance PRI capacity to own, control, and manage village public health infrastructure and services.

Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committee (VHSNC)

One of the significant elements of NRHM is the Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Committee (VHSNC) which has been formed to take collective action to health-related issues at the grassroots level. The role of VHSNC is to improve the functioning of healthcare systems especially in rural areas. This Committee serves as a platform to enhance health awareness, access to community health needs, and indeed involves in community-based planning and monitoring. However, the success of the VHSNC depends on active community participation. The Committee would be formed at each revenue village and is expected to serve as a sub-committee of the Gram Panchayat. This means VHSNC is accountable to Gram Panchayat. Further, each hamlet that comes under revenue village should be given due representation in VHSNC. With minimum membership of fifteen, the elected member of the Panchayat would lead the Committee and all health functionaries, beneficiaries (poor and vulnerable) would represent the Committee. Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) of the village would be the member secretary and convenor of the Committee. While forming committees, due representation should also be given to Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), minority communities, women, poor and marginalised.

Roles and Responsibilities

Some of the roles and responsibilities include creating awareness on community health and nutrition, conducting survey on village nutritional status and deficiencies among women and children, promoting traditional wisdom on locally available food stuffs by consulting the community, supervising the Anganwadi Centre, and organising of Village Health and Nutrition Day to monitor the programmes implemented for the village. Significantly, the VHSNC monitors the healthcare services being provided at the primary and secondary level.

By filling scorecards for facilities and services been provided at the healthcare unit and by interacting with service users (community), VHSNC can identify gaps and key issues. They also organise Jan Samvads, a forum that encourages dialogue between community and authorities wherein health related grievances would be redressed (Tuteja, 2022).

Besides, the Committee conducts in-depth analysis of the reasons for malnutrition both at the household and community levels. In a way, the Committee serves as a public forum to redress grievances related to health and nutrition. In order to reach out to all villages, the NRHM has advised state governments to constitute VHSNC and to notify it as a sub-committee of Gram Panchayat. It has also been notified under the NRHM guidelines that VHSNC would function under the leadership of the respective Gram Panchayat.

Example 1: In Karnataka, VHSNC has been serving as significant social space to create health awareness among low-income groups. A study team had observed that ever since the functioning of VHSNC there has been a significant reduction in the incidence of diarrhoea infections. Secondly, there has been an increase in number VHSNC members and their active participation. Thirdly, the community had improved their ability to interpret health information. In fact, effective VHSNC has the ability to ensure coping capacity of community with any type of communicable and non-communicable diseases (Madon, 2020).

Example 2: In Assam, there are a total of 27,673 VHSNCs catering to the health needs of the community. As per the guidelines issued by NRHM, a PRI member is the President and each VHSNC has been annually granted an untied fund of Rs. 10,000/- to mitigate the health needs of the village. Apart from receiving training about smooth functioning of VHSNC, the members have been oriented to maintain the cash registers and vouchers related to committee activity (Government of Assam website).

Case Study

Deepak Foundation, a non profit organisation based in Vadodara intended to empower decentralised health planning in 2006. In 2009-10, the Government supported few non-State actors in building capacities of nearly 4,000 Committees across Gujarat. Firstly, Gram Sabha was conducted to create awareness about the Committee and the need to evolve Village Health Plan so as to resolve grassroots level health issues. Indeed, consent of community gatekeepers was sought to establish 'inclusive committee' so that representations from different economic and social groups can be part of it. The members contributed to open a bank account. The Foundation helped the members to learn about fund management, record management and relevant registers. It distributed Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials to members regarding community monitoring process across the villages of the district so that the functionaries would understand their roles and functions.

The Foundation helped the Committees to hold regular monthly meetings, enlisted health issues, decided appropriate action plans, encouraged the community to contribute for health funds, documentation of minutes of meeting, and enabled the Committee to forward applications to health authorities thorough outreach workers. The enlisting of health needs were documented, compiled, and analysed by the Foundation. Some of the health related issues include poor health facilities, inadequate visits of health functionaries, poor supply of medicines etc. For perspective, the Committee utilised the untied funds to procure weighing scale, stethoscope and alike so that when Anganwadi workers visit primary health centres

(PHCs), they would monitor the health status of pregnant mothers, women etc. Once in six months, applications were sent to block level authorities regarding resolved and unresolved issues. With the objective to improving block level transparency and accountability, Jan Samvad (public dialogue with authorities) was conducted wherein unresolved issues and grievances were discussed. While basic grievances were sorted out during Jan Samvad, high and complex grievances were referred to district and state authorities.

In a span of four years, the Foundation was able to vertically build health functionaries vis-a-vis 1496 village level committees, 75 primary health federation, 12 block level federation, and 1 district federation. For instance, the district level federation that represented 12 blocks met monthly to resolve district level interventions. Through the federations, village level health and action plans that were put forth by the community were incorporated in the primary and block level federation which eventually amalgamated into a decentralised health plan. This was for the first time that district authorities started taking stock of people centric plans (Deepak Foundation, 2013).

From the examples discussed above you can understand the pivotal role of non-State actors in realising local development goals.

9.4 DECENTRALISATION OF EDUCATION

Brief History of Decentralisation of Education in India

The decentralisation context could be traced in the recommendations given by the National Policy of Education, 1986, which put forth involvement of the community in decision making process. Secondly, it put forth decentralised management of education at district, sub-district, and panchayat levels. With the implementation of 73rd CAA, PRIs were entrusted to implement policies and programmes related to education. Concurrently, with the purpose to boost primary education system, the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) was evolved in 1994. One of the elements of DPEP was to establish Village Education Committees (VECs) in schools. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992, DPEP in 1994 gave necessary impetus to community participation. Decentralisation context was further strengthened by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) with its mandate that local educational management be transferred to Village Education Committees/School Management Committees/Gram Panchayats (CNI, 2018).

School Management Committee (SMC)

Under the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, Gram Panchayat has been entrusted the power to set up School Management Committee (SMC) with fifty percent of its members being women. This is to ensure that the RTE is rightly enforced. It plays a crucial role in educational accountability especially among government schools. In fact, SMC is a decentralised governance model that is empowered to monitor the way school functions. The structure of SMC includes PRI representatives, parents/guardians of students, school Principal and teachers of the respective schools. For perspective one third members should be the locally elected members.

Across States

In Meghalaya and Gujarat, steps have been taken by SMC members to include school drop out children back to schools by encouraging their parents. This way they were able to increase school enrolment ratio (Chugh, 2021). Similarly, in Uttar Pradesh (UP), the SMC members played an active role in urging parents to send their children and thus improved the school attendance percentage. In fact, the state government of UP launched an initiative 'School Chalo Abhiyan' and this was effectively utilised by the SMC members. The initiative intended to promote school education especially among the drop-outs.

In West Bengal, SMC members collaborated with Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) workers to collect data about school attendance, marginalised and drop out children. Based on the data, appropriate ways were taken to resolve the educational challenges. When it comes to Meghalaya, SMC members inspect schools and mobilise funds from villages to acquire books, uniforms, and teaching learning materials. Annual drives and programmes for sanitation and sports have also been organised by SMCs.

Role of Civil Society Organisation in Mobilising SMCs

Example 1

Life Education and Development Support (LEADS), a civil society organisation has contributed to building capacities of SMCs. The training was provided to the SMCs, the Gram Sabha collaboratively came up with a school development plan. The SMC federation (group of SMCs) made a consolidated plan and presented it to the block level education officials. One of the key achievements of this plan was separate washrooms were built for girls and boys in at least 20 schools (Oxfam, 2015).

Example 2

In Kamlamal school, Boden block, Odisha, SMC members were confronted with the problem of children and teachers' safety. There were minor accidents due to the 1100 kilo-volt power supply that was connected to the transformer. As it was located within the school premises people inside the school were under constant threat. Upon receiving training, SMC members shared their grievance with the District Collector and District Education Officer. They regularly followed it up until due action was taken. Within a month the problem was resolved. An engineer was entrusted with the responsibility to change the location of the transformer. A sum of 1 lakh rupees was allocated to resolve the issue (Dayaram, 2011).

Example 3

In Shivhari village, Maharashtra, parents came to know that their SMC was disbanded by the school Principal. The SMC President being a parent and other members filed a Right to Information (RTI) petition to the Block Education Officer to verify whether their names were there in official sheet. To their shock, they found out that their names have been changed. Upon notice, the matter was followed up and thus the Principal was punished for his arbitrary action. Subsequently, SMC was activated with the original members elected by the village community (Dayaram, 2021).

From the above examples, you are able to understand the value of such Committees in realising development goals.

9.5 CASE STUDY: INSTITUTE OF GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE

To strengthen and enhance grassroots democracy in India, a group of youth (alumni from Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development) has started the Institute of Grassroots Governance (IGG) in Tamil Nadu (Thiruppur). It is a registered professional society that educates grassroots level leaders about their rights and responsibilities. As majority of grassroots level leaders are not adequately trained to utilise government schemes, the young team aim to build their capacities. In fact, they empower educated women leaders and those elected representatives from vulnerable population. For instance, around the year 2020-21, they conducted around six online training sessions for newly Elected Women Representatives (around 97 participants) about basic elements of local administration like how to handle finances, how to write an application to higher authorities about local problems, file management, collecting people's grievances through participatory modes etc. Post training, IGG formed a WhatsApp group and participants (PRI functionaries) get their doubts clarified regarding administrative matters. It is an active group that clarifies the doubts of newly elected representatives regarding political and administrative issues.

Secondly, through IGGs 'Grassroots Democracy Fellowship' they encourage young, trained interns to directly support panchayats in administrative matters, effective functioning of the standing committees (health and education) and alike. They also provide technical support to gram panchayats in evolving Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) and collaborate with various stakeholders in making it a reality. They also employ Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) that empowers people to plan, implement, and evaluate development programmes. Besides, they also facilitate the community in water budgeting, promote the establishment of Biodiversity Management Committee (BMC), preparation of People's Biodiversity Register (PBR), Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and alike (IGG website).

At a micro level, IGG intends to train people to become 'actors' of development rather than a passive recipient and it bridges the existing gap between local government and other stakeholders by empowering the panchayat functionaries.

ACTIVITY

View the below video and write down your observations as this will be helpful for TEE.

Social Audit for MGNREGS - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSoczGGHIj8>

A village the world should be proud of Popatrao Pawar at TEDxGateway 2013 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPIbhqmjVBY>

9.6 CONCLUSION

For developing the grassroots, Bhattacharya (2011) views 'Decentralisation' as an institutional mechanism that could build administrative space to accommodate the 'felt needs' of the poor. Bhattacharya (2011) asserts that "India is now passing through a new paradigm of development administration with its focus on the grassroots administrative spaces that have traditionally remained the stronghold of the bureaucracy and the vested interests". From this Unit, you must have understood that development is possible only through people's participation and without them it would be unattainable. There have been many actors from State to non-State who have contributed immensely for the development at grassroots level.

As learners, you can think of working as community facilitators as there is a huge dearth of trained human resources at this level.

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