

# CHAPTER 10

## Rural Democratization for Broad-Basing Extension

### EXPERIENCES FROM INDIA

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## Introduction

Enhancing the role of the rural masses in decision-making on matters related to their lives and livelihoods has been widely acclaimed as a trusted pathway that would lead to their empowerment and development. Even though it is apparently difficult to achieve, this has been realized in many places through the collective action of people. Many development theorists and practitioners have underlined the significance of fostering participation of people as a major intervention for sustainable development at the grassroots level (Bosc et al., 2002).

In fact, the concept of participatory development has been construed and implemented differently in different sociopolitical situations. Getting involved in the development process is a highly contextual proposition, which draws immensely from the idea of democracy and representative governance. Political participation has figured in the discourses on these topics since ancient times as a means of providing citizens with opportunities to communicate their views and take part in decision-making. From that point of view, participation could be some degree of representation of people in decision-making bodies, which would ensure that they have a stake in decisions regarding matters about them. The idea of participation in decision-making on matters related to development is obviously an outcome of this democratic process. However, in practice, the level of participation may range from nominal to deeper involvement, based on the power and influence wielded by the group and nature of the activity (White et al., 1994). Participation as a concept eludes specific definitions, as it changes from context to context, according to the priorities and conviction of the key actors of a decision-making process.

In spite of the amorphous nature of its definition, participation has become an integral part of development debates across the world. Nevertheless, a participation process assumes different levels and has been categorized as pseudo participation and genuine participation (Deshler & Sock, 1985). According to them, while pseudo participation is only peripheral and limited to merely domestication and assistance, genuine participation aims at cooperation and citizen control. The degree to which a stakeholder is

prompted to participate is evident from the nomenclature of these two categories. The formal is superficial participation with minimal involvement of the stakeholders; they would just be informed of the details or they would be manipulated by pretending that they have been informed. Meager consultation with the stakeholders would also be considered as pseudo participation if they are not taken along during the project life cycle and afterward. On the other hand, genuine participation would involve partnership, delegation of powers, and thereby, empowerment.

Due to this paradigm shift in the approaches to grassroots-level development, every development intervention has varying provisions to ensure participation of people, at least nominally. It is more evident in rural development interventions in the developing economies, with room for its beneficiaries to involve in any of the various phases: formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, or the entire course of the project.

Even while the rhetoric on participation is on, ensuring participation of people in the development process would be difficult due to the uneven socioeconomic conditions, mainly in developing economies with wide socioeconomic diversity. With the interplay of several complex factors that contribute to inequality in terms of endowments and opportunities in action, participation of people is difficult to materialize in its absolute sense under such premises.

## Translating Participation Into Actionable Programs

In most of the rural and agricultural milieus, particularly in the developing economies, collective action is often regarded as a condition for achieving long-term ownership of development-oriented actions. It may also be considered as a condition for expanding individual strategies and evolving common wisdom (Bosc, 2018). Collective action and participation are corollary to each other. In other words, this implies that individuals get together to achieve some common goal and thus accept to face the constraints and difficulties linked to collective action. Collective action and participation in matters related to agriculture and rural development are more relevant than what is apparently seen, as these sectors undergo substantive transformations quite frequently. However, given the dissimilar perceptions on participation, translating the rhetoric of participation to reality would warrant humongous efforts on the part of development planners and implementers to integrate the ideals of participation in development administration. In fact, participation and the strategies to ensure participation of people in development interventions have evaded the attention of the priority of planners for a long time. This has led only to nominal and ineffective participation of people, without any impressive outcomes. As White et al. (1994) observed, this has been pseudo participation, wherein the control of the project and decision-making power lay mostly with planners, administrators, and the community's elite and not with the people. Genuine participation would happen only when the development bureaucracy, the local elite, and the people work cooperatively throughout the decision-making process and when the people are empowered to control the action to be taken.

The world over, one of the most important methods of translating the ideal of people's participation in development is democratic decentralization, which envisages delegation of political power and resources to local governments, which are truly representative and democratically elected and have robust systems for decision-making and implementation. In developing economies, democratic decentralization assumes more importance as it would empower the rural population by enhancing their access to resources and decision-making power. Experiences on feasible paradigms of democratic decentralization across the world show that the process of democratization is a highly evolved form of political empowerment and can enhance participation, transparency, and efficiency. However, connecting democratization with development requires a whole set of innovative institutions and processes that would warrant enhancement of financial resources to local government; participation of stakeholders in deciding development intervention; generation and management of human resources, social capital and financial resources for being invested in the process; devolution of fiscal and administrative authority to undertake administrative decisions at the local level on key development issues; transfer of key development agencies to local self-governments; establishment of stakes for people's representatives, local resource persons, and local organizations in the functioning of development agencies; and responsive and participatory auditing systems to enhance transparency (Vijayanand, 2009).

## Rural Democratization as a Driver of Development

Rural democratization is a long and difficult process that involves struggles to build social and political organizations capable of representing the diverse interests of the rural poor and amplifying their voices in public policy processes (Franco, 2008). Further, rural democratization involves attempts to increase state accountability to previously excluded or marginalized members of the rural population, especially the landless poor and rural women. It also implies deploying strategies for effectively protecting and claiming rights of these sections of the community. This would invariably trigger far reaching changes in the rural development sector as it offers proper definitions of problems and realistic efforts to address them. Moreover, this will help evolve innovative ways to engage the state and make its development policies more accountable to the less endowed segments of rural society (Franco, 2008; Bebbington, 1999). Though specific approaches and strategies to be adopted might change in different countries based on the nature of rural societies, it has been observed that regardless of the rural poor population in the country, what goes on in the rural political arena is important because it can affect the lives and livelihoods of large numbers of people, including those living in more urban areas. Though in varying degrees, the democratization process has been able to address several pertinent and long-standing issues related to rural poverty, and access to resources, health, housing, education, and sanitation with better outcomes (Jayal et al., 2007).

Successful experiences of rural democratization have shown that it would primarily facilitate a more inclusive decision-making process, which might warrant better articulation of the requirements of the people concerned.

This is a departure from the conventional ways of addressing development problems under a centralized paradigm of decision-making and implementation. This transition must be seamless and orderly for expected results. As observed by Bhattacharyya (2008), for democratization to be relevant and fruitful, sustainable measures have to be adopted to create legally protected bodies of local governments, especially in the rural areas. Functions of these bodies should be periodically renewed following institutional norms in the transaction of their business. They should also be made suitably responsible for administering policies pertaining in particular to the population and resources of their respective jurisdictions. Even if such institutional arrangements are put in place, the democratization process would stagnate unless people become aware of its significance and become convinced of its effectiveness by seeing measurable impacts. Apart from this, a skewed local power structure marked by the presence of influential local elite would deter free transactions among the community. Nevertheless, any attempt to revamp the centralized system of decision-making is a welcome change in developing communities, as it may evolve into a more inclusive system eventually by imbibing impetus from the beneficiaries themselves. The rural democratic process, as pointed out earlier, should envisage rigorous inner drivers to facilitate participation of people, formal structures to articulate people's opinion, proper processes to delegate authority and resources (both human and financial), dynamic institutional structure to convert people's needs and aspirations into action plans, and a system to implement and monitor the process by involving all possible stakeholders as much as possible. To put it otherwise, rural democratization as a political process provides a plausible framework to translate the theory of people's participation in development into an actionable program.

## Rural Democratization in India: The Process & Evolution

The rural democratization process in India has been made possible by the historic legislations on democratic decentralization spelled out in the 73rd and 74th amendments of the constitution that rendered the local self-government institutions mandatory and powerful. The amendments envisioned revival of the archaic systems of local governance as designated authorities for local development. The local governments turned out to be legal entities that could be involved liberally in local development. As outlined in the amendments, elections to rural and urban local bodies were made mandatory, and they were bestowed with significant powers to spearhead and direct local development initiatives. The amendments also envisaged local-level planning in key development sectors as a mandatory function and suggested various financial resources that could be utilized to plan and implement local development initiatives. The structure and functions of the subsystems of this process of local governance were also broadly outlined in the amendments. For instance, the amendment had formalized village councils for people to meet and engage in dialogue with local authorities.

While the amendments suggested the broad framework of democratic decentralization and its objectives, the respective state governments were given freedom to improvise the provisions in the amendments and draw up newer forms of institutional arrangements to facilitate the democratization

process to reach far and wide. Nevertheless, it did not take up momentum, as most of the constituent states of the country had not expedited these interventions to carry democratization and decentralization of development administration forward (Isaac & Franke, 2002). However, the state of Kerala, located in southwestern India, which had its own legacy of democratic decentralization, drew up a specific plan in 1996 for democratic decentralization. The state, with laudable track records of accomplishing the highest literacy rate in the country as well as universal education and health care, had already ventured into decentralization with plans to devolve authorities to the district level and further below, much before the amendments. This new opportunity for strengthening local self-governments had in fact created an impetus for thoroughly exploring the provisions of the constitutional amendments to convert them into hubs of grassroots-level development processes. This was made possible by establishing three levels of local governments at the district, block (the middle tier), and villages and devolving political and financial authority to these institutions. This included four distinct measures: (1) transferring key development departments in the rural sector and their personnel to the local self-governments; (2) devolving administrative authority to plan, implement, and monitor development program at the grassroots level; (3), devolving as much as 30% of development grants of the state government to the local governments; and (4) formulating an innovative framework of processes and procedures to draw up local-level development plans in all key sectors that have direct impact on the people.

As observed by Jayal et al. (2007), revival of local self-government institutions in the country had been paralleled by a proliferation in the number and variety of actors involved in governance at the local level. In fact, the local self-government institutions had remained archaic without any relevant role in local development and the new legislative framework had infused significant vigor into these systems.

As the local governments were transformed into institutions with greater mandates, more authority and resources, a new web of linkages with other institutions and agencies became necessary. First, as much as twelve development departments were transferred to the local governments to work under the supervision of the political leadership. Second, the state government formulated a robust system of delegating powers and resources to the local governments and drew up a well-orchestrated process to formulate grassroots-level development projects. The most striking aspect of this exercise is that the planning process was made characteristically inclusive with adequate options for the people to articulate their needs and aspirations. This was primarily done by means of engaging people in the village councils by facilitating free interaction and recording their needs and reflections systematically to formulate development projects. This would be followed by prioritization of the proposals by the local body leadership and verification and approval by a team of experts and officials at the district level. Projectization of needs and suggestions would be led by the official of the development department deployed at the local body. Approved projects would also be implemented by this official based on broad fiscal guidelines and priorities decided by the state government from time to time.

Consultation with the people takes place at different levels in this process. Village councils are the primary fora where the dialogue on needs, requirements, and priorities take place. These deliberations are consolidated and projectized by working groups consisting of

representatives of people and a few selected citizens who could be instrumental during the projectization phase. Subsequently, projects are finalized and prioritized by the local government, which is formed by elected representatives of the people. Similarly, the people's participation is ensured in implementation and monitoring as well. Beneficiaries of the projects are selected based on well-laid-out criteria and approved by the village council. Monitoring of implementation also is made in a participative manner by committees that include people's representatives and volunteers constituted for this purpose. This process is adopted in formulating and implementing development projects in all the key sectors of rural development: agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, health, education, sanitation, irrigation, housing, energy, roads, and social welfare. This is also accompanied by innovative methods of ensuring transparency and accountability in governance, mainly through computerization of the activities of local bodies and establishment of responsive systems for redressing citizen's grievances. The whole system of local governance is also moored to a strong system to ensure citizen's rights, which include citizen charters, judicial bodies for preventing corruption, and other means.

Many authors have commented that this new system of participative decision-making and project implementation through a structured system of rural democratization has made the development administration more focused, target oriented, responsive, and transparent. Though it has not yielded promising results in all the sectors, a growing body of evidence proves that investment in all development fronts relevant to the rural sector has increased considerably. It has been reported that sectors such as rural housing, agriculture, enterprises, infrastructure, and education have recorded higher investment and commendable social returns with great positive impact on women's empowerment, public consciousness on rights and privileges, social capital formation, and collective action.

This innovative method of inclusive development planning, which would impact the lives of people much more positively than the traditional bureaucratic system in the public sector, has opened up new vistas of partnership and joint action among different actors. This system, which relies on local ingenuity and freedom to devise solutions for local-level development problems, has thrown open possibilities for establishing functional linkages among different development agencies. The provisions of the decentralized governance give considerable freedom to the local bodies to harness the support of institutions and agencies at the local level in innovative ways. For instance, investment in agriculture could be enhanced by seeking partnership from cooperative financial institutions in the locality. Similarly, small and marginal producers could be organized to establish a network of producer collectives to safeguard their interests more easily than before. The platforms of rural democratic institutions offer innumerable opportunities for human resource development, social capital formation, negotiation, consensus building, conflict resolution, and creative thinking in several ways.

# Rural Democratization to Broad-Base Extension & Rural Advisory Services

Agricultural extension in India as well as in other developing economies can draw valuable lessons from the experiences of decentralization and rural democratization. It appears that this would be a plausible solution to the issue of strengthening the extension delivery systems. Experiences show that the new system of rural democratization has made the public extension systems vibrant and responsive more than ever before. As investments in agriculture for the common good have been showing declining trends during the post-reform period resulting in serious setbacks for the less endowed farmers (Jha, 2007; Mani et al., 2011), this system of devolving power and financial resources at the grassroots level would boost the local economy and improve the livelihood options of the rural poor. As extension is an important instrument that catalyzes development, it will have new roles to play in supporting and facilitating this participative and inclusive system.

National extension systems in many developing countries have declined over the last couple of decades due to lack of political and financial support, reduced investment, attrition of human resources and physical infrastructure, and lack of clarity on the roles of the public extension institution in relation to other stakeholders and service providers (Rivera, 2011). Governments guided by the provisions of the structural adjustment agenda tend to shirk their responsibility by assigning the interventionist role to multiple actors, private and nongovernmental sectors included. Though this might enhance pluralism of intervention, social control over the agencies given this responsibility would lessen. This is one reason why many authors solicit public extension systems with social control as a pre-condition to safeguard the interests of the poor farmers in developing economies (Sajesh & Suresh, 2016). Rural democratization, on the other hand, offers immense scope to involve all the actors and bring back a growth model propelled by the logic of redistributive growth, grounded on the rights of the communities and the collective ownership of their resources, and promptly linked to the market.

Deliberating on the scope of decentralization of agricultural extension, Swanson and Rajalahti (2010) observe that decentralization not only gives local government control over personnel and finances, but also in theory, focuses control closer to the level of farmers and thus can improve extension accountability to their needs. Rural democratization, supported by efficient systems of service delivery and functional linkages, can bring about substantial changes in the delivery of extension services. Since there is better scope for wider consultation with stakeholders, identifying critical problems and applying precise solutions would be easier. Experiences of the rural democratization process in the state of Kerala have reaffirmed the efficacy of this system in harnessing the collective action of people in many sectors.

The effectiveness of the rural democratization process has clearly manifested in the attempts of rural local self-governments to restore precious natural resources such as wetlands and other ecosystems through

intensive campaign and public action. Many local governments have evolved beacon programs that showcase better management of common resources and productive initiatives by collectives of farmers, farm women, and rural entrepreneurs aided by the collective wisdom of the community and public funds. Another immense possibility has been the integration of financial resources for assisting local-level development interventions. The efforts of various agencies that work in a locality with the same objectives and same set of clientele in focus could be integrated to build up synergy. This has resulted in better capital mobilization producing better results. It has also offered adequate room for linking rural enterprises with value chains duly supported by credit and micro finance institutions. This new regime of rural democratization has also facilitated coordination of small and marginal farmers for group farming, which improves productivity and efficiency. Above all, compartmentalization of development agencies without mutual cooperation and interaction has also been reduced to a considerable extent through this process, as there are provisions to coordinate the efforts by different agencies that are complementary to one another. For instance, coordination among the departments of agriculture, animal husbandry and fisheries, which is important for integrated farming, would be easier in this new framework. This new paradigm has also given way to public-private partnership initiatives and association with nongovernment organizations to enhance the effectiveness of development interventions in the rural settings. The productive sectors such as agriculture and allied enterprises have been given emphasis in response to the requirement of the people, and this has reflected in the emergence of a multitude of enterprises in agriculture throughout the state. Intensive involvement of people of all hues, prompted by the mobilization in rural democratization, has made the development agencies more conscious of their significance.

All these new systems have necessitated reorientation of the roles and functions of extension agencies. This has prompted customized service delivery to various types of client groups. Roles of development personnel have also undergone substantial changes. Instead of remaining as bureaucrats, these officials now must address several professional challenges as planners, organizers, analysts, technocrats, problem-solvers, and managers of various types of development interventions, which are closely monitored by people. However, not everything is well with such decentralized public systems. Bureaucracy, local politicking, and lack of innovation and updating have had their share in setting in the signs of degeneration of the system. Devolution of authority and financial resources may have to be enhanced to take up new challenges. Building capability of the actors at the grassroots level to manage the institutions that have been formulated for facilitating decentralization would be the biggest challenge. The ways of preventing deterioration and improving efficiency also necessitates detailed enquiries about this system. Building up autonomous and sustainable systems would remain as uphill tasks unless these vulnerabilities are addressed.



# Learning From the Praxis of Democratization: Implications for Extension & Advisory Services

Extension scientists as development interventionists and social researchers should explore the dynamics of rural democratization in detail. While doing this, they should be able to characterize the policy environment required to revive rural institutions democratically. Innovations in linking the grassroots-level democratization process with better livelihoods would show the way ahead for effective utilization of rural resources. How efficiently such systems address important concerns such as sustainability and ownership of common resources could be of interest to an extension researcher. Evolving a robust system of rural democratization warrants critical social action and departure from the conventional norms of participation.

The rural democratization process in the state of Kerala has led to creation of new knowledge domains and skill sets that have to be internalized by extension functionaries. An analysis of a set of beacon projects implemented by rural local bodies as part of this rural democratization process and decentralized planning has shown that the development personnel have to assimilate new knowledge and skills for effectively managing these rural institutions (Alex & Sulaja, 2012). They should also be skilled in training and orienting the stakeholders to accomplish pre-decided development goals. Extension advisory services must now respond to a wide range of issues other than technical solutions to farmers. The new domains are mostly on planning for development, building institutions, organizing people with diverse interests, creating interfaces with the political leadership, resolving conflicts, community managing of common property resources, managing value chains, negotiating with partnering agencies, coordinating with diverse institutions, integrating financial resources, managing data and drawing inferences for long-term planning, and assessing impacts, to name a few.

## Conclusion

Rural democratization is a lengthy sociopolitical process, which would help extension scientists learn how new institutional arrangements in a decentralized and democratic framework could bring about changes in various development sectors. As discussed earlier, it would also unearth the difficulties in making participation work, even while the framework and settings are conducive. The new paradigm of development planning may create new insights about the dynamics of collective action in the community and how it could be supported by technological interventions. Bringing diverse institutions and their programs together for sustainable and comprehensive development of a region is a challenging task. Managing the web of relationships that would emerge out of the interactions among these institutions warrants innovative approaches and methodologies of rural management. The rural democratization process would also help us identify the new skill sets to be acquired by extensionists. However, these experiences would enrich our understanding on the scope of broad-basing

extension in the developing economies. It would be unfair on the part of extension scientists to leave out this important innovation from the realm of their academic interests.

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