ENABLING THE POOREST TO BENEFIT FROM DECENTRALISATION: GRAM VIKAS' MODEL

Christine Whinney and Joe Madiath

Gram Vikas

ABSTRACT

Decentralisation is the process where responsibilities are moved from central government to local government bodies / institutions. There have been a number of advantages and disadvantages cited regarding this process; the most commonly cited advantage being that the transfer of responsibility enables government to be more accountable and transparent. However, this is often countered by the argument that very often it is just the elite who become empowered and it makes little difference to the poorest person.

This paper describes the implementation process and mechanism of self-governing village institutions employed by Gram Vikas, an Indian NGO working with predominantly the poorest and most marginalised communities in Orissa. This paper also aims to assess how the non-negotiable requirement of 100% inclusion, and capacity building activities ensure the very poorest benefit from decentralisation and improve communities' ability to hold local government institutions to account.

1. INTRODUCTION

Decentralisation is defined by Johnson (2003) as; "A political process whereby administrative authority, public resources and responsibilities are transferred from central government agencies to lower-level organs of government or to non-governmental bodies, such as community-based organisations (CBOs), 'third party' non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or private sector actors."

(Crook and Manor, 1998: 6–7; Rondinelli et al., 1989; Meenakshisundaram, 1999; World Bank, 2000a:3).

In an Indian context, decentralisation involves devolving power to the village level of governance, or the *Gram Panchayats*. With the exception of the state of Orissa, these are the lowest level of government, and normally represent 1000 to 2000 households. This may be one large village, or it may be a number of hamlets in close proximity to each other. A General Body (*Gram Sabha*) is usually functional in these villages, and is comprised of every head of household in the village/cluster of hamlets. The General Body discusses issues and makes decisions relevant to the Gram Panchyat.

Gram Panchayats have been in existence for centuries, however it is only since 1992, when the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments Act was passed, that these Panchayats were recognised as local self-governing institutions. The Act was based on Gandhian principles. Gandhi wanted each village to be responsible, and able to take decisions regarding their own affairs. The Act aimed to devolve some of the powers and responsibilities of National government and state governments to the local level. The main features of this Act are given in Box 1.

This Act was revolutionary and changed the face of Indian Politics, as Mukarji recognises

"The amended Constitution requires the states to constitute panchayats as institutions of self-government not only for villages but also at intermediate and district levels. Consequently, there

will, henceforth, be three strata of government: the union, the states and the panchayats. A more radical change is difficult to visualise. Its implications are far-reaching"

(Mukarji, 1993: 859-62, as cited in Hadenius, A (Ed))

Box 1: Key features of the Constitutional Ammendments Act

- (i) A 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all States having a population of over 20 lakh (The three-tier system in this Act refers to the Gram Panchyat (Village level), Panchayati Samiti (Block level) and Zilla Parishad (District level))
- (ii) Panchayat elections held regularly; at least every 5 years
- (iii) Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women (not less than one-third of seats)
- (iv) Appointment of State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats
- (v) Constitution of District Planning Committees to prepare development plans for the district as a whole

(Taken from: rural.nic.in-Panchyati Raj- cpt 3)

In the Indian state of Orissa, the process of decentralisation in governance has been initiated by enacting amendments to the Orissa Panchayati Raj Act, which not only recognises the Gram Sabha, but also the Palli Sabha. Orissa is the only state that recognises the Palli Sabha (Ward sabha) as the lowest tier of governance; where issues of

development can be deliberated, as well as decisions taken regarding spending. These must then be sent to the Panchayat for final approval.

However, efforts at translating these intents in the real context, and in their true spirit have not met with much success. Efforts at transparency and active participation of common people in the process of decision-making have not been there, and therefore the frequency of such meetings has been quite low. It is in this context, that in spite of a huge allocation of resources, development initiatives have largely been concentrated in the hands of bureaucrats and people have hardly played a role in determining the process.

From the literature, there are two key arguments for and against decentralisation. One argument for decentralisation regularly emphasised in the myriad of literature is accountability, and the ability for public figures to be held to account through a variety of means such as public meetings or elections. De (2009) puts forward this argument and states

"decentralisation as against centralisation is expected to take care of the needs and preferences of communities as powers and responsibilities are devolved to lower levels. It is also expected to increase accountability of the government in the delivery of services. Therefore, delivery of services is expected to be better through decentralised institutions than through centralised institutions" (De, 2009)

The recognition of empowering the elite, for example village leaders, is one of the key arguments against decentralisation. It is often cited as a key reason why the poorest and most marginalised will still not benefit, or have equal access to services, even after decentralisation.

Johnson et al (2003) explains this as, "the devolution of power will not necessarily improve the performance and accountability of local government. Indeed, in many cases, decentralisation simply empowers local elites to capture a larger share of public resources, often at the expense of the poor."

This paper will review Gram Vikas' integrated village development programme, and look at how this programme helps to ensure accountability in decentralisation and truly enable the poorest to benefit.

Gram Vikas are a rural development organisation working in predominantly the Indian state of Orissa since 1979. Gram Vikas work with some of the most marginalised and poorest communities, using water and sanitation as entry point activities for holistic village development. The water and sanitation activities are implemented under Gram Vikas' umbrella MANTRA (Movement and Action Network for the Transformation of Rural Areas) programme.

The MANTRA approach works to improve the effectiveness and accountability of grassroot people's organisations in the following ways:

<u>Management and leadership of village level institutions</u>: The Village Executive Committee (VEC), of which 50% of its members are women and there is a proportionate representation of the different castes /

social groups present in the village amongst its members, is a democratically elected body taking responsibility for the management of all development programmes in the village. This committee is also registered as a society, enabling them to leverage funds and making it easier to communicate with PRIs and government organisations.

Accountability and transparency: The development intervention is based on 100% consensus and participation of all adult men and women in the village. A General Body is formed, which comprises of every male **and** female head of every household in the village. This General Body elects the VEC, which is accountable to the General Body. Due to every household being involved in the General Body, and elected members of the VEC forming a true representation of village demography, local governance can truly be accountable and transparent.

<u>Linking with the state/ market</u>: Village institutions have developed confidence and capabilities to engage with external agencies. They are able to collectively bargain with their elected representatives, banks, traders, and contractors.

2. GRAM VIKAS' MANTRA

MANTRA is Gram Vikas' flagship programme, which uses water and sanitation as an entry point for integrated village development, and is based on 5 key principles:

- 100% inclusion: Every household in a village without exception must be involved
- Gender equity: Males and females must take an equal role in decision making
- Social equity: Everybody regardless of class or caste must share responsibility for the project and be involved in decision making
- Cost-sharing: Poor people *can* and *will* pay for truly beneficial development

• Sustainability: Mechanisms are put in place to ensure the longevity of the project after Gram Vikas' withdrawal

In MANTRA, every household in the village constructs for itself, a toilet and bathing room, with 24-hour piped water supply to both the toilet and bathing room as well as to the kitchen of the house. The water is supplied from an overhead water tank constructed on the basis of estimates of per capita consumption of water (of 40 litres per day), projected for a population twenty years hence. The water is pumped up using electricity where available and in the hilly areas, water is sourced from perennial springs using the gravity flow system. Solar power pumps have also been used, where pumping is needed and no electricity is available.

Gram Vikas firmly believe that the poor can and will pay for their development. Therefore, as primary beneficiaries, people contribute at least 70% of the costs of toilets and bathing rooms (costing a total of Rs.8000) and up to 30% of the cost of establishing a water supply system. The idea is to make people contribute substantially, since this is critical in bringing a strong sense of ownership for the assets created. Towards the construction of an individual toilet and bathing room, Gram Vikas provide a subsidy of Rs.3000¹ while people generate the rest through local materials (like bricks, sand, stones, boulders, and aggregates); their physical labour; as well as cash contributions. This subsidy, which is used to meet the cost of external materials used for construction is seen as a social cost, necessary to make basic services available to the disadvantaged. It is a cost that governments and society, at large, must bear, and although Gram Vikas firmly believe that people should contribute towards their own development, there is also the feeling that the rural poor must have access to services fulfilling their basic needs as a matter of right, and not due to any form of patronage dispensation. To put the issue in perspective, it should be remembered

¹ Gram Vikas provide an enhanced assistance of Rs. 3500 to dalits and adivasis and in some very difficult terrains

that the urban populations are provided with enormous government subsidies for facilities ranging from electricity connections, drainage and sewerage, and education.

In addition, the initiation of the programme is subject to the generation of a 'corpus fund' by the village, to which every single household contributes Rs.1,000 on average (the poor give less and the better off more, but the poorest widow also gives at least Rs.100). Complete collection of this upfront payment is considered to be an 'acid test' of commitment for the communities, where people collectively confirm that they are willing to be a part of this programme. This corpus fund ensures that 100% coverage is maintained at all times in villages and when new households are added to the village, the interest accruals from the corpus would be used to extend the same subsidy to them so that they may be able to construct their own toilets and bathing rooms. Thus, the responsibility of meeting the cost of external materials (which Gram Vikas today provide in the form of a subsidy) for the future is taken over by the village committee, to provide for new families in the village.

In addition to the building of the physical infrastructure, it was realised that institutional mechanisms could also be developed around the MANTRA programme, and self-governing institutions strengthened. Much effort is put into organising village management committees and meetings, and through 100% inclusion, and capacity building and training activities, accountability and transparency can be maintained.

3. STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES, AND ENSURING THE POOREST BENEFIT FROM DECENTRALISATION: GRAM VIKAS' MODEL

One argument against decentralisation is that it often just involves empowering the elite, for example village leaders, therefore the poorest or most marginalised will still not benefit or have access to services, even after decentralisation. Johnson *et al* (2003) explains this as, "the devolution of power will not

necessarily improve the performance and accountability of local government. Indeed, in many cases, decentralisation simply empowers local elites to capture a larger share of public resources, often at the expense of the poor."

Gram Vikas' implemented structures of local governance, in addition to the non-negotiable requirement of 100% consensus ensures that this is not the case, and even the poorest and most marginalised benefit from the same level of service, and have an equal say in deciding how the project should be implemented.

The structures of governance implemented by Gram Vikas in villages are rigorous, transparent, and accountable. Firstly, a General Body (equivalent to the *Palli sabha*) is established, which comprises of **every** male **and** female head of household. The majority of villages impose a fine for those households not attending meetings regularly. This body then elects a Village Executive Committee (VEC), which usually consists of 12 members. There are a couple of rules regarding the election of members to ensure maximum transparency and accountability; 50% of the committees' members must be female, and 50% male; there must also be proportionate representation of the different castes / social groups within the village present on the committee.

The VEC is responsible for the management of the water and sanitation project within the village, and is accountable to the General Body, and every month must present their expenditure and accounts to the General Body. As the General Body includes every household, *without exception*, the accountability and the transparency of village decision making and village spending is maintained.

In addition, 100% inclusion enables villages, which have been divided along lines of caste and class, and where there has been a long standing tradition of discrimination against women, to unite and come together, therefore giving everybody a voice and equal access to basic facilities. This in turn overcomes these caste, class, and gender barriers, and results in greater transparency and accountability in using the village funds. Gram Vikas also work to build the capacities of individual groups, such as women and the

excluded, so that they too can participate on an equal level. For the first time the poorest woman, the widow, or the *dalit* (untouchable) feels that s/he has a voice, which will be heard and which matters.

In addition, the committee members and all villagers learn how to deal with conflicts and act as pressure groups against vested interests within their village and outside. They learn to question and hold accountable the village committee that is elected by them. Villagers learn the ropes of maintaining public accounts, organising general body meetings and elections. As Johnson (2003) identifies this,

"participation in local, democratically elected bodies can lead to improvements in self-identity and worth, which can help to break down customs of inequality and discrimination (cf. Robinson, 1988). Second, membership of local administrative bodies can provide important skills (e.g. bookkeeping, leadership, etc.) that can be transferred to other walks of life". (As cited in Johnson, C (2003)

Over time, both men and women begin to accept the enriching role that women can successfully play outside of their families. This is reflected in the respect given to them and in the loosening up of traditional roles, codes of conduct and, gradually, in power relations. Women have taken over the responsibilities of maintenance and monitoring of water supply and toilets, in resolving conflicts, organising mass protests, enforcing programme codes in the village and in advocacy beyond the village. They are also confident and firm in their interaction with government officials, banks and other outsiders.

Another important aspect is the regular training sessions organised on Panchyati Raj Institions (PRIs), which allow the villagers to understand better how local government works, as well as understanding their rights and how to influence this local level of government. Gram Vikas also believe that once basic needs have been met, for villages to continue improving, they need to be able to influence the external environment and gain a favourable bargaining position vis-à-vis the state or the market. "Such a position can be gained only through a rights-based approach, where large numbers of communities unite and demand their rights. This united movement will have the 'critical mass' necessary to force governments,

political organs, private sector enterprises and other civil society organs to react to communities' demands." (Madiath and Jayapadma)

Once people begin to experience managing their village water supply and sanitation systems, they begin to take interest in the Ward Sabha (*Palli Sabha*). Most Executive Committees have ward members or other Panchayat representatives as members. The general body, which is the *Palli Sabha*, is strengthened and supported to formulate micro-plans for presentation in the *Gram Sabha*². As the programme is being implemented in a cluster approach, there would, usually, be quite a few habitations of a *Panchayat* implementing the programme. When united communities come together, they form a 'critical mass' that can demand a change in their respective *Panchayats*. These villages together mount great pressure for the proper functioning of the *Gram Sabha* and holds to account the elected representatives of the *Panchayat*. They are also able to access funds for the programme and also for any further development activities that need to be carried out in the interest of their village. Establishing linkages with the Panchayats is a step towards evolving strong people-centric local governments.

4. CONCLUSION

As discussed, there are several arguments for and against decentralisation. The main argument for it, being that decentralisation helps to improve transparency and accountability, but, the main argument against it is that it can also lead to just the elite being empowered. This article has aimed to outline Gram Vikas' model of whole community development, with specific emphasis on institutional development and good governance, which insists on 100% community inclusion, and empowers the whole community. This model ensures that it is not just the elite who become empowered. In addition to ensuring it is not just the elite who are empowered, by having a 100% inclusion policy, the institutions have a numerical advantage; it is much easier for a large, well organised body to assert themselves and hold Panchyats to account than smaller bodies.

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² Gram Sabha is the general body of the Panchayat, where five or more villages are represented.

Despite the mixed views regarding the benefits of decentralisation, there is belief that in an Indian context, decentralisation is the best way to reach such a large population. Kumar and Kumar state that due to "its [India's] enormous size, diversity and development challenges, decentralisation is perhaps the only way to reach out effectively to remote corners and the masses." They also believe that the evidence suggests, "Panchayats are quite capable of handling local development issues."

Community empowerment is key to improving the accountability and transparency of local government. Gram Vikas' efforts at capacity building, and raising communities' awareness of working with PRIs is crucial to the success of decentralisation. With strong, united self-governing institutions, which have members who are knowledgeable and able to hold Panchyats to account, in addition to having the numerical strength and whole community involvement, decentralisation may well be the best way to reach remote and rural communities as Kumar and Kumar believe.

This article has aimed to outline and explain Gram Vikas' village development model, and one such model of village self-governance that can improve the accountability, transparency, and eventual success of decentralisation.

5. REFERENCES

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