Understanding Community Participation

Concept and Experiences

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Introduction

Community life has been the basis of human existence. Most social norms, activities, interactions are a result of man's tendency to live in groups. Over the ages it has served as an agency of protection, support, administration and governance. Its history is a reflection of how important community has been to the mankind. It started as agency of protection but soon it undertook the role of defining human relationships. Each individual while following various social and economic pursuits fulfils his or her role in the society. One can thus conclude that community is the end result of mankind's trial in achieving the greatest good of all.

The world has changed a lot in the last century. It is a world where the developing countries are trying to emerge from their colonial past, while coping with poverty, diseases, lack of infrastructure and resources. The developed countries on the other hand have to deal with a market which is quite dependent on the stability of the developing countries. Moreover, the developed countries are in search of a novel method of dealing with a society which is increasingly multiethnic and diverse. The countries today are thus, seeking a methodology which could in some ways limit role of state as an agent of reform and regulation as the existence of these problems makes it apparent that the present methods of governance are insufficient. Increasingly, it is being believed the participation at the community level i.e. local level by ordinary people is in many ways a better and more efficient method of realising the goal of good and responsible governance.

The problem with the third world especially India remains that the governance is so unitary that policies which should ensure development often fail to achieve their goals. The reasons for this are several. The primary cause for the failure of government as the agent of change and growth is that the policies made, do not reach down to the people at lowest level, people who remain unseen but are in need of developing the most. The trickle down effect of such policies is minimal. The 73rd and 74th Amendment Act of the Constitution in India sought to implement a people oriented government at the local level. However, the level of community participation in such a decentralised set up remains questionable. Moreover, developing countries face problems which are largely area and context specific, for instance, control of diseases

such as HIV- AIDS, disaster management, natural resource management, generation of employment at the local level, management of services etc.

Community Participation: Concept

Community participation is adept in dealing with many problems that developing country of the world face today. It can be understood as a forum wherein people can participate in the decision making process and are involved in the local affairs. According to United Nations[1], it is defined as the creation of opportunities to enable all members of a community to actively contribute to and influence the development process and to share equitably the fruits of development. This theory of governance is in certain ways like revisiting the reasons of community life wherein the community as a whole is involved in promoting welfare. Instances of community participation infact show that when people are given the chance to participate in the decision making process, the resulting policies are often the best possible solutions to any local problem. And it be would be interesting to note that community participation is also an efficient method of recognising problems which otherwise go unnoticed at the macro-level. It is also desirable as it leads to better management and sustainable utilization of resources, improves access of the people to the governing body.   Community participation when first heralded as the new method of promoting development in the 1960's, was seen as a method to promote sustainable and long term development. Interestingly, most environmental covenants speak of community participation as a method of managing natural resources and promoting sustainable practices. Communal support in family life, child care and health which otherwise are informal social networks are given due recognition through such participation.   Community participation thus, may seem like an equitable approach towards governance.

Community participation if used rightly used can pave the road to development. It is an empowering tool whereby a community is empowered to decide for itself. Freedom of choice and access to information is essential requisites for the furtherance of a self

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[1] Community participation. Available at http://www.infed.org/community/b-compar.htm, Accessed on 03-06-06

reliant community. [2] Empowering people leads to giving them necessary rights which they can use for their own betterment. It has been seen that an empowered community or group can flourish even when the bureaucratic set up of the country fails. In the Kecamatan Development Program of Indonesia, during the Krisis Monetar (krismon) years, the government just fell apart. Despite the political and economical uncertainty and the widespread conflict in the country this program made phenomenal gains. It spread from 2000 villages to around 34,000 villages[3].

Community participation is empowering people through the creation of opportunities and security which enable people to be self sufficient. It is interesting to note, empowerment goes hand in hand with the creation of a certain extent of security. Thus, the role which the government plays in facilitating community participation is interesting to note. Most societies keep these initiatives outside the government purview and develop its own ways of bringing change and better management of services and resources.

Community Participation: International Perspective

Most societies have informal community practices. In the politically advanced countries most of these practices reflect in their forms of governance. Local governance in developed countries such as the U.K., Germany is conducted with active participation from the general public. Developing countries are now working their way towards decentralization. India in its attempt to decentralise effectively introduced new tiers of local governance in the village and urban level. Community participation was envisaged as the ideal pillar of flourishing democracy; however successful implementation of the same remains questionable. Adequate participation of women

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[2] "The term empowerment has different meanings in different socio cultural and political contexts, and does not translate easily into all languages…These terms include self strength, control, self power, self reliance, own choice, life of dignity, in accordance with one's values, capacity to fight for one's rights, independence, own decision making, being free, awakening, and capability – to mention only a few." (Source: Narayan Deepa , *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction, A Sourcebook*, The World Bank, 2002)

[3] The Kecamatan Developmental Program is a national Government of Indonesia program, implemented by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Community Development Office, aims at alleviating poverty, strengthening local government and community institutions, and improving local governance. It was started in 1998 and will continue until 2009. www.worldbank.org. Accessed on 05-06-06.

and disadvantaged groups in village administration is still a distant dream and community participation in urban governance is only for namesake.

Bolivia has a law of Popular Participation. This law was implemented in 1994 and envisaged the formation of voluntary vigilance committees called the *Organizaciones Territoriales de Base* (OTB). OTBs have the function of supervising municipal services. These committees also participate in public hearings, oversee government expenditures, and have standing to comment on development decisions and bring legal claims under relevant environmental and financial laws. Under this law, local communities like indigenous communities, farming communities or neighbourhood associations can petition to be recognised as an OTB. This law has institutionalised community participation in a novel way which increases accountability and enhances the involvement of community in policy making. Its impact has been far reaching geographically.

The Bolivian Law of Popular Participation is perhaps the first of it's kind which recognizes and empowers community with real administrative functions. However, in other parts of the world including India, community participation was heralded by civil society movements, community movement itself and at times with the initiative of the government. For instance, the drive to control the spread of HIV-AIDS, a campaign is being run in South Africa which includes the government, Voluntary Organisations and the community itself. The program works with certain organisations and trains community members who in turn spread awareness about the disease. This is infact an excellent example of how information can be disseminated with the help of community networks and associations.

There have been several community movements the world over. Some have demanded identity rights, some to get civil rights while others have been to find answers to their problems. An interesting example is of Alandur underground sewage scheme.[4] This

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[4]" Launched in February 2000, the scheme envisages the establishment of a sewage treatment plant of 24 million litres a day, on the build, operate and transfer mode, and a pumping station and laying of main and branch lines for 120 km. The executing agency, IVRCL, has been authorised to operate the plant for 14 years before handing it over to the local body." Ramakrishnan T. , www.hinduonnet.com, Community Participation Makes All the Difference, Nov 5, 2003.

scheme was supposed to be a public-private venture, the cost of which was estimated at Rs 34 crores. However, with the change of the political regime, the scheme was bogged down with bureaucratic problems. The citizens of Alandur, a township south of Chennai, raised around Rs 11 crores. It was the initiative taken by the community and their enthusiasm which brought the project to completion.[5] Other examples such as the widespread co-operative movements across the country and the formation of a huge number of Self Help Groups are witness to the vitality of communities.

In Nepal, to stop any further degradation of forests, the forests have been divided into National Forests and Community Forests. Community forests are managed by community forests user groups (CFUGs). There is an operational plan according which the community forests users manage and utilize the resources.[6] This operational plan is devised by the Divisional Forest Officer, however, the matters of identification of users, participation, leadership and sharing of benefits is decided by the user groups in consultation with the Village Development Committees.

In India, to manage forest resources, a similar method called Joint Forest Management is being used.[7] The Joint Forest Management has diversified into Community Forest Management wherein local community and community based organisations are being implemented in several states with a varied degree of success rates. Community participation though has led to a better and sustainable management of resources both in Nepal and India, there are numerous obstacles to overcome. The purpose of such

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[5]"… And, it has become possible because of community involvement. Moreover, it took only about three and a half years for the benefits of the project to percolate in his area, while it took 12-15 years in Tiruchi and Coimbatore." Ramakrishnan T., www.hinduonnet.com, Community Participation Makes All the Difference, Nov 5, 2003.

[6] "As of 2002, there are about12,600 CFUGs in the country, managing about one million ha of forest with involvement of one and half million people in management. This has been achieved in spite of constraints in forming of CFUG, sharing of benefits, participation, leadership and deciding the CF boundaries more so in non homogeneous communities where interests of different ethnic/caste groups clash." Maharjan Keshav, *Community Participation in Forest Resource Management in Nepal.*

[7] "About 90 per cent of India's 64 million hectare forests is State owned; the rest is community and private forests. This was not always the case. Until the end of the 19th Century, at least 80 per cent of India's natural resources were common property. The forest area under State control has increased progressively since British rule. Now, with its support for JFM, India is returning to the idea of community management of forests, though the State retains ownership. Thus, Indian forest management has now entered a state of transition, moving from "conventional State controlled forest management" to "decentralised community forest management" *Campaign to Save Forests,* www.hinduonnet.com, 2001. Accessed on June 3, 2006.

projects is often manifold. Along with the sustainable management of resources, the idea is to help develop the community as well. It is the development of the resources with the aim of poverty alleviation. However, instances of women and weaker groups comprising of lower caste and poorer class getting marginalised in the development process is a problem which can not be overcome by the present day methodology. In India, the control of funds remains with the forest officers. In such a situation one can not help but wonder how much power the community has to hold the forest officers accountable.

Role of Civil Society Organisations in Community Participation

Civil society organisations in the past have led some of the most spectacular community movements towards development. Barefoot College has become one of the names to reckon with. It is an organisation based in the village of Tilonia in Rajasthan. It is a training and activity centre working on an area of 80,000 sq feet which has over the years worked with community and evolved new community oriented methods of dealing with problems of rural unemployment, lack of healthcare and sanitation, power generation and ecological care which includes programmes for water management. The organisation has so far covered a population of 1, 25,000 so far and is indeed an example of community participation. Most of the programmes are co-ordinated and carried out by the community members and such programmes often benefit the poorest in the society.

Another splendid example of empowering a community by a civil society organisation would be the case of water management in Alwar, Rajasthan. Tarun Bharat Sangh, a local NGO, facilitated this community led revival of the water sources in Alwar. Until the community got involved, Alwar faced sever environmental degradation and a huge water crisis. The construction of traditional methods of water storage called *johads*[8] was undertaken and a part of the costs were also borne by the community. Over the last two decades, more than 4500 water harvesting structures were built. This program initially even faced the ill directed wrath of the local government. The District

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[8] "A *johad* is a semi-circular earthen check dam, designed to block the flow of streams during the monsoons and to create a small reservoir behind them, helping to recharge the groundwater to ensure sufficient water supply, even during the dry season." www.geic.hq.unu.edu Accesses on June 6, 2006.

Authorities declared the construction of the *johads* illegal and transferred the fields in the catchment area to families residing elsewhere. But now Alwar is an example of community driven growth.

It is apparent from the above examples that community is a vital, ever changing, evolving part of the state. The instances of community rising up to serve itself are many and the few recounted above tell us the ways in which it has been done so far. The reason why the present set fails is because of its distance from the community. The people who make laws and policies often do not have the first hand knowledge of the problems and the issues facing the common man. Community must have a role in the decision making process. It not only brings the government closer to the problem but due to the control that community exercises on the governing agencies it makes the process of governance accountable and transparent.

Law on Community Participation: Is it a Pre-requisite?
In this context a specific law on community participation does seem appropriate. After the Right to Information Act 2005, a law succinctly defining the interaction of government and community would indeed empower the citizens to a level where governance would most certainly be people oriented. However, the structure and the requisites for having smooth machinery wherein both the state and citizens decide is not an easy methodology to evolve. Community participation requires certain degree of economic infrastructure in place.

Major requisite is the presence of a conflict resolution agency wherein the conflicting interests of various communities can be addressed. Most of the community based programmes presently managed by the state have been plagued by the problem of lack of transparency in funds. The allocation of funds and resources to programme is out of the purview in most community based policies. Making funding transparent would not be the entire solution. While talking of community participation laws, one must give due regard to the status of administrative laws in the country. India decentralised its governance over a decade ago. This decentralization process suffers from many shortcomings but the one noteworthy problem would be the insufficient allocation of funds to the local bodies. It is necessary for the proper implementation of community

participation laws that a country's access to information laws and decentralization policies are in place.

Another issue which needs to be addressed at the outset of formulating a policy on community participation is whether a uniform community participation law is possible. For a country like India where differences of caste, class, language, creed, gender define a community it is indeed difficult to imagine that a uniform community participation law is possible.   Implementing a uniform law even with special reservations may not always apply to each an every issue. For instance, where disaster management is in question, it would be impossible to have community participation on caste basis. It would entirely depend on the geographic location of the area, the kind of natural or man made disaster whether or not it has occurred, the application of standards in disaster management, and perhaps special provisions for the old, sick and children. The context of every problem requires a different set of policies.   However a parallel can be drawn from the legislations which have taken place after the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts. The states made the laws implementing the provisions of the Constitution. However, these laws were considered variable and not true to the spirit of the provisions of the Constitution. The need for a federated approach[9] was thus felt by many wherein the Central Government could give guidelines, upon which the states could articulate suitable legislation. Perhaps, a federated approach for community participation laws would be necessary to have systemised and at the same time a law which caters to a diverse population.

Conclusion

For successful implementation of community participation would thus depend on the following:

- A decentralised platform.
- Availability of information.
- Fiscal backing of the government.

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[9] Fahim M. **,** *Federated local government offers advantages over more centralised or fragmented systems,* www.citymayors.com. , Accessed on 23 May,2005.

- Clearly defined role of the community while managing or accounting for such funds.
- Recognition of problems.
- Recognition of communities on priority basis pertaining to the context.
- Recognition of stakeholders.
- Recognition of community leadership.
- Recognition of the role of community based organisations and voluntary organisations.

To put it in perspective, community participation should be a melting pot of decentralised decision making with fiscal backing from the government in the light of available information where in community should have a clear defined role in managing financial and natural resources as well as accountability of the government officials and authorities.   Once this is set as a background, problems should be recognised on priority basis for each community and stakeholders should be identified so that their role can be defined in making things accountable.   Community leadership should be emphasised with the help of community based organisation and voluntary organisations.   This framework will be strengthened if community participation law is formulated based on broad guiding principles of decentralised community participation in local decision making and acknowledgement of citizen rights rather than mere generosity on the part of the government.