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Index

Sr. No	Title	Author	Subject	Page. No.
1.	Assay Of Triphenylmethane Reductase Enzyme And PCR-Based Identification Of TMR Gene In Enterobacter Asbriae Strain XJUHX-4TM	Tina Mukherjee, Mounita Bhandari, Manas Das	Biotechnology	1-2
2.	An Analysis Of Growth Of Credit Card Industry	Dr. A. Vinayagamoorthy, K. Senthikumar	Commerce	3-5
3.	Impact Of Pre-Merger And Post Merger On Financial Performance (With Reference To Private Sector Banks)	Dr. Shital Vekariya	Commerce	6-8
4.	Relativity On Climate And Competencies In Human Resource Development With Reference To Neyveli Lignite Corporation Ltd,	S. Jayakumar. Dr. R. Ramachandran	Commerce	9-11
5.	Human Resource Outsourcing: A Strategy For Gaining Competitive Advantage	Dr. Santosh M. Singh	Commerce	12-13
6.	Relationship Between EVA And ROI And MVA (A Case Study Of Ten Manufacturing Industries In India)	Dr. Shivani Gupta	Commerce	14-15
7.	Modeling The Traits Of An Effective Teacher At Higher Education	Dr. Haridayal Sharma	Commerce	16-17
8.	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (Mgnrega): Issues And Challenges	Dr. Mohd. Ashraf Ali, Mushtaq Ahmad	Commerce	18-20
9.	Standardisation And Grading	Viram. J. Vala, Dr. Vijay Kumar Soni	Commerce	21-22
10.	Profitability Of Selected Information Technology Companies In India	Dr. M. Jegadeeshwaran, C. Udaya	Commerce	23-25
11.	Emerging Trends In The Indian Media And Entertainment Industry	Dr Mahalaxmi Krishnan	Commerce	26-27
12.	Inventory Management Strategies And Control Techniques: An Empirical Investigation Of Small Scale Industries	Vipul Chalotra, Neetu Andotra	Commerce	28-30
13.	A Study On Performance Indicators Of Commercial Banks	Dr. G. Ganesan, P. Parthasarathy	Commerce	31-33
14.	Improved Approaches To Coreference Resolution In Machine Learning	Kuldeep Singh Raghuwanshi, Ashwini Kumar Verma	Computer Science	34-37
15.	Security Issues & Controls In Cloud Computing	V. Naga Lakshmi	Computer Science	38-40
16.	Human Development Index Of De-Notified Nomadic Castes In Maharashtra Division: A Study Of Jalna And Aurangabad Districts	Dr. Ashok Pawar	Economics	41-43
17.	Public Private Partnership In Rural & Urban Projects In India	Dr. Ashok S. Pawar, Dr. Shankar B. Ambhore	Economics	44-45
18.	Populace Insight On Development In Public Health Sector Of India Subsequent To Functioning Of National Rural Health Mission	Krishnakant Sharma	Economics	46-49
19.	Problems Of Rural Women Entrepreneurs In India: A Conceptual Overview	C. Jeyasri Usha N Devi, Dr. A. Sankaran	Economics	50-52
20.	Poverty Of Banjara And Vanjari Communities In India	Tidke Atish S., Dr. Pawar Ashok S.	Economics	53-54
21.	India And China: Economic Reforms And WTO	Dr. Surinder Kumar Singla, Dr. Kulwinder Singh	Economics	55- 56
22.	Implementing Life Skill Education Strategies In Teaching – Learning Process	R. Kalaiselvi, Dr. A. Palanisamy, Dr. A R. Saravanakumar	Education	57-59

23.	Utilisation Of Modern Technology By The Teachers In Pupil Processing Organisation	Dr. P.Paul Devanesan, Dr A. Selvan	Education	60-61
24.	Impact Of Vocational Training On Students	K.Sudha Rani, G.Umapathi, Dr. T. Ananda,	Education	62-63
25.	A Study On Emotional Intelligence Of Secondary School Teachers	Dr. Umme Kulsum, Prathima H.P.	Education	64-66
26.	The Efficiency Of Feedback Strategy Of Homework On The Development Of 10th Grade EFL Writing Skill In Al-Karak Educational Directorate	Majid Al- Khataybeh, Areej Al-Shourafa`	noitacudE	67-74
27.	Perspectives Of Stress Management In Education System	M. Meenakshisundaram, G. P. Raja, Dr. A R. Saravanakumar	Education	75-76
28.	Attention Regulation Of Meditators And Non-Meditators Of Class IX	G. Madhavi Kanakadurga, Dr. D. Vasanta Kumari,	Education	77-78
29.	Role Of Psychoeducation In Teaching – Learning Process	Dr. A R. Saravanakumar, Dr. A. Balu, Dr. S. Subbiah	Education	79-80
30.	Microcontroller Driven RGB Led System For Tristimulus Surface Colorimetry	T. N. Ghorude, A. D. Shaligram	Electronics	81-83
31.	Pmgsy And Rural Roads Development In India: Economic, Financial And Maintenance Issues	K.C. Manjunath	Engineering	84-86
32.	Routing Packets On A Chip.	Naren V Tikare	Engineering	87-89
33.	Finding The Nearest Neighbors In Biological Databases	Er. Pankaj Bhambri, Dr. O.P. Gupta, Er. Franky Goyal	Engineering	90-92
34.	Factors Affecting The Sustainability Of The Asphalt Roads: A Case Study Of Irbid Inner Ring Road, Jordan	Eng. Nasr Ahmad Dr. Mihai Iliescu	Engineering	93-94
35.	Physical And Chemical Testing Of Compounded PVC	Sapna Dabade, Dr. Dheeraj Mandloi, Deepak Khare	Engineering	95-96
36.	Impact Of Organic Farming On Yield Of Some Common Crops- A Case Study.	Namrata D. Awandekar	Environmental Science	97
37.	Hydrogeologic Settings Of The North And South Brahmaputra Plains In Upper Assam: A Comparative Study	Dr. Uttam Goswami	Geology	98-100
38.	To Study Staffing Pattern In Rajasthan Public Healthcare Delivery System.	Dr. Ashwin G. Modi, Sushman Sharma	Healthcare	101-105
39.	Work And Health: A Situational Analysis Of Factory Workers	Dr. S. S. Vijayanchali, Dr. E. Arumuga Gandhi	Home Science	106-108
40.	Performance Of Camel Kid Hair: Acrylic Blended Yarn And Knitted Fabric	Suman Pant, Anjali Sharma	Home Science	109-110
41.	Impact Of Holistic Nutrition Education Package On Diabetes Mellitus Control In Middle Aged Women	Dr. Anjali Rajwade	Home Science	111-112
42.	Assessment Of Relationship Between Ida And Personal Hygiene, Nutritional Knowledge And Dietary Practices In Adolescent Girls	Dr. Anjali Rajwade	Home Science	113-114
43.	Employee Attrition And Retention In Private Insurance Sector– A HRM Challenge	Dr. J. Senthil Vel Murugan, S.Bala Murugan	Human Resource Management	115-117
44.	A Study On Impact Of Unionism On Industrial Relations In Manufacturing Sector	Jaya Ahuja	Industrial Relations	118-120

45.	Augmentation Of India's Foreign Exchange Reserve: An Analysis	Dr.S P.Mathiraj, Ar.Annadurai	International Business	121-123
46.	Films – A Techno Literary Art Form	Dr. Dipti Mehta	Literature	124-125
47.	Indirect Models Of Reading To Develop Descriptive Writing	Dr. K. Madhavi	Literature	126-128
48.	Ramkrishna Mishra Ke Upanaso Me Rajnetaik Chetavni	Dr. Sanjay Rathod, Dilip Jhadav	Literature	129
49.	Hindi Kavita Me Nari Jivan Ka Badla Swarup	Dr. Sanjay Rathod	Literature	130
50.	Impact Of IPL Sponsorship On Consumer Buying Behavior With Reference To Nagpur City	Chandrima Das	Management	131-135
51.	Crowd Sourcing –A New Management Mantra	Devi Premnath, Dr. C. Nateson	Management	136-137
52.	Small Scale Industries In India: An Evaluation Of Productivity In The Post-Liberalized Scenario	Dr. Gaurav Lodha,	Management	138-139
53.	Comparative Analysis Of Milk Products With Respect To Its Competitors With Special Reference To Karnataka Milk Federation (KMF) – At Dharwada City, Karnataka, India	Dr. N. Ramanjaneyalu	Management	140-143
54.	A Study On Work Stress In Women Employees In Coimbatore District	R. Maheswari, N. Brindha	Management	144-145
55.	Accounting For Carbon Credits	Dr. Gaurav Lodha	Management	146-148
56.	A Literature Review On The Relationship Between Training (As A Core Responsibility Of HRM) And Firm Performance.	Priya Sharma, Dr. S. L. Gupta	Management	149-152
57.	A Study On Agricultural Marketing Practices And Constraints With Special Reference To Paddy / Rice.	CM Maran, Dr Raja Pranmalai	Management	153-156
58.	Performance Of Share Price Of Indian Public Sector Banks And Private Sector Banks - Comparative Study	V. Prabakaran, D. Lakshmi Prabha	Management	157-158
59.	Intuitionistic Fuzzy Primary And Semiprimary Ideal	Dr. M.Palanivelrajan, S.Nandakumar	Mathematics	159-160
60.	Significance Of Umbilical Artery Velocimetry In Perinatal Outcome Of Fetuses With Intrauterine Growth Retardation.	Dr G S Shekhawat	Medical Science	161-163
61.	Large Adult Sacrococcygeal Teratoma: A Case Report And Review Of Literature.	Dr.Yavalkar Pa, Dr. Naik Am.	Medical Science	164-165
62.	Epidural Steroid In Low Back Ache	Dr. B. L. Khajotia, Dr. Neelam Meena	Medical Science	166-167
63.	A Comparative Study Of Second Trimester MTP With Use Of Vaginal Misoprostol And Extra Amniotic Instillation Of Ethacridine Lactate.	Dr. Ketaki Junnare, Dr. Sameer Darawade, Dr. Priyamvada Shah, Dr. Swati Mali.	Medical Science	168-169
64.	A Novel Surgical Approach For Treatment Of Sui –TVT Obturator Tape	Dr. Ketaki Junnare, Dr. Durga Karne, Dr Neelesh Risbud.	Medical Science	170-171
65.	Advantage Of Fallopian Tube Sperm Perfusion Over Intra-Uterine Insemination When Used In Combination With Ovarian Stimulation For The Treatment Of Unexplained Infertility.	Dr G S Shekhawat, Dr Pushpalata Naphade	Medical Science	172-175

66.	"Bilateral Sertoli-Leydig Cell Tumor In Postmenopausal Female" A Case Report	Dr. Priyamvada Shah, Dr. Ketakijunnare, Dr. DurgaKarne	Medical Science	176-178
67.	Pretreatment With Ephedrine For Prevention Of Pain Associated With Propofol Injection.	Dr. Kavita U Adate, Dr. Jyoti A. Solanki	Medical Science	179-181
68.	Does The Structured Teaching Programme Influence The Knowledge About Physical Wellbeing Of School Children? A Quasi Experimental Study.	Dr. S. Valliammal, Dr. Ramachandra, Raja Sudhakar	Nursing	182-184
69.	An Approach For Information Retrieval For Bookstores Using Formal Ontology	Sumit Jain, C.S.Bhatia	Ontology	185-187
70.	Analgesic Activity Of Anacardium Occidentale	A. Devadoss, C. Aparna, K. Parimala, D. Sukumar	Organic Chemistry	188-190
71.	Behaviourism : Science Or Metaphysics	Dr. Jatinder Kumar Sharma	Philosophy	191-193
72.	Multi-Dimensional Perspectives Of Obesity And Its Management	S. Dhanaraj, Dr. A. Palanisamy	Physical Education	194-196
73.	Refractive Index, Density, Excess Molar Volume, Excess Molar Refraction For Liquid Mixtures (Ethyl Ethanoate + Benzene Derivatives) At Different Temperatures	Sheeraz Akbar, Mahendra Kumar	Physics	197-199
74.	Refractive Indices, Densities And Excess Properties For Liquid Mixtures (Cetane + Alkanols) At Different Temperatures	Sheeraz Akbar, Mahendra Kumar	Physics	200-202
75.	Capacity Building For Effective Local Governance: Indian Perspectives	Dr. Pralhad Chengte	Political Science	203-205
76.	Psychological Well-Being: A Study Of Non-Institutionalized Aged	Dr. Pankaj S. Suvera	Psychology	206-208
77.	Women Empowerment Through N R E G S (With Reference To State Of West Bengal)	Dilip Kumar Karak	Social Sciences	209-211
78.	Effect Of Selected Yogic, Aerobic And Laughter Exercises On Blood Pressure Of High School Boys	Dr.Manjappa.P, Dr.Shivarama Reddy. M	Sports	212-216
79.	Association Study Between Lead And Copper Accumulation At Different Physiological Systems Of Goat By Application Of Canonical Correlation And Canonical Correspondence Analyses	Partha Karmakar, Debasis Mazumdar, Seema Sarkar (Mondal), Sougata Karmakar	Statistics	217-219
80.	Development Of Silver -Silica Nanocomposite For Novel Humidity Sensing Application	Surender Duhan	Technology	220-221



Capacity Building For Effective Local Governance: Indian Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Local governance is being promoted in India because it is believed that it provides a structural arrangement through which local people and communities can participate in the fight against poverty at close range. However, it is acknowledged that various capacities of a multiplicity of stakeholders and actors need to be strengthened to meet the requirements of effective and responsive local governance. As we know that the most vibrant democratic institution at the grassroots level in India is Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) which is figured to be participatory, accountable, responsive, and transparent and citizen friendly local self-government. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments provided the constitutional provisions for constructing and operating of such bodies at the local level in India. Some of these provisions are inclusive and democratic in nature such as one-third reservation of seats for women and schedule castes and tribes (dalits) and decentralization of power etc. But the nature of functioning of these bodies for last few years exposed ineffectiveness and inefficiency in governance and delivering of services to the local people. The effective local self-governance indeed is still a distant dream and needs enormous interventions to realize its potential. This dream can possibly be realized by the way of comprehensive understanding of capacity building in terms of governance. The paper discusses a comprehensive meaning of capacity building, issues and challenges related to capacity building for effective local governance in India. It also attempts to view Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as institutions of local self-governance and not as mere implementers of centrally determined development programs.

Keywords : Participatory, Transparent, Governance, Responsive Accountable etc.

Introduction

After the independence the Indian state offered a democratic form of governance to its citizen by adopting the Constitution in 1950. The Constitution enshrined a host of rights to the Indian citizenry along with a federal structure of the government. The Constitution since its adoption has undergone several Amendments to incorporate many significant social and political requirements of the contemporary society. The 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments brought in 1993 provided the Constitutional framework for constituting democratically elected governance mechanisms at the local level. The provisions in these Amendments have some far reaching implications with respect to democratic governance and local development. By providing one-third reservation for women and proportionate reservation for other socially excluded and deprived sections (tribals, dalits etc.), the Constitutional framework for local governance mechanisms in India has enormous potential for affirmative action. One of the most important roles for these local governance institutions is to plan for local development and ensure social justice in consistence with the citizens' needs and aspirations.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are as follows;

(i) To view Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as institutions of local self-governance and not as mere implementers of centrally determined development programs.

(ii) To give emphasis on Bottom-up comprehensive planning based on micro-planning.

(iii) To emphasis on active participation in decision making by women and other weaker sections with a view to enhance their role, status and leadership in local self-governance.

(iv) To assert PRIs' access to and control over local natural and human resources as well as other development resources being available with state and national governments.

(v) To strengthening PRIs' roles, systems of governance, accountability and transparency and inter linkages.

Need of the Study

The experience of functioning of these local bodies in the past 10 years in India makes it clear that effective local self governance is still a distant dream and requires enormous interventions to realize its potential. This is particularly so because such democratic decentralization is coming after nearly 50 years of centralization in the state machinery, public resources and bureaucratic structures. As a result, hierarchies of government departments and agencies have generated vested interests and exercise their responsibility to apply public resources in an unaccountable manner. On the other hand, nearly five decades of state led model of development delivered from the top has created a sense of passive dependence on government agencies, programs and resources among citizens in rural and urban areas. As a result, there is a need of the study in this area to have an organized system of governance at the local level.

Framework Of Capacity Building

There is a lack of consensus on the meaning of capacity. Capacity as a multi-dimensional aspect consists of awareness, knowledge, skill, self-confidence and actions. Capacity in this context can be defined as the totality of inputs needed by an actor to realize its purposes. Applied to local bodies, this will ensure that such institutions are able to function effectively as institutions of local self-governance in the perspective elaborated above.

Capacity of such institutions can be seen in three distinct though inter-related aspects:

- i) Intellectual Capacity implies capacity to think, reflect and analyze reality independently and in pursuit of self-defined purposes of local self-governance.
- ii) Institutional Capacity includes procedures, systems, structure, staffing, decision-making, transparency and accountability, planning, implementation and monitoring. It also includes mechanisms for building linkages with other institutions and actors.
- iii) Material Capacity consists of material resources, physical assets, funds, systems and procedures to mobilize revenues; access and control over physical and natural resources and infrastructure; systems and procedures required for adequate management of funds and such infrastructure.

Viewed in the above sense, capacity building comprises consistent training of individuals (involved in local governance) for organizational strengthening, institutional learning, exposure, horizontal sharing and solidarity. Capacity building is also a long-term process of strengthening a local body based on systematic learning of new knowledge, skills and attitudes. This can be expected only in the system of democratic decentralization that offers opportunities for popular participation, improved accountability, responsiveness and transparency of local bodies, increased effectiveness and efficiency of government service. In other words capacity building approach as described here, comprises of a broad set of interventions which promotes the development of competent, responsive and accountable local self-government, the establishment of mechanisms by which different population group can equally participate in local decision making process and evolution of civil society players and organization.

Local Governance

Governance is a multifaceted compound situation of institutions, systems, structures, processes, procedures, practices, relationships, and leadership behavior in the exercise of social, political, economic, and managerial / administrative authority in the running of public or private affairs. Good governance is the exercise of this authority with the participation, interest, and livelihood of the governed as the driving force. Local governance therefore refers to the exercise of authority at local community level.

Capacity Building Of Gram Sabha As Civil Society

Effective functioning of local self-governance requires decentralization of policies, strategies, legal frameworks, programs and activities, the transfer of authority, responsibilities and resources from central government to local government structures and the empowerment of grass-root communities which enable them to determine plan, manage and implement their socio-politico-economic development. It also needs active, engaged and organized citizenry. But in reality, the families and communities have been increasingly divided on the basis of caste, religion, ethnicity and gender in our society. The marginalized (women, dalits and tribals) sections of the community are systematically excluded from political participation by rural elites (higher caste) in support with local authority and strong patriarchal system. Therefore the most significant involvement needed is to strengthen Gram Sabha as contemporary civil society formation in each village. Capacity enhancement interventions at this level demand an appreciation of the collective identity of Gram Sabha. A strong

Gram Sabha also requires institutional mechanism to function effectively, effective conduct of periodical Gram Sabha meetings for development, planning and implementation of policies and programs and collective decision-making in common public good. Large scale Pre-Election Voters Awareness Campaigns (PEVAC) can be organized in partnership with other voluntary organizations, State Election Commission and local bureaucracies and Massive educational interventions on various aspects of election including how to cast votes through street plays, street meetings, and distribution of posters, pamphlets etc. to make the common people a well informed electorate..

After the election, series of orientation meetings explaining the roles of Gram Sabha as a collective entity, discussing problems and issues and identifying needs and priorities of the people shall be organized. These orientation meetings also serve the purpose of initiating dialogue between various marginalized groups and elected representatives of PRIs (Gram Panchayat

However, in most cases citizens particularly the marginalized are not aware about dates and places of such meetings. The very first step of participation attendance in the decision making meetings have been purposefully obstructed by the vested power lobbies in the villages. In many places campaigns are organized to inform the local citizens before the actual Gram Sabha meetings.

Informational and educational materials (like posters, handbills, leaflets, brochures etc.), folk performances (like folk songs, street plays, mimes etc.), video film shows and rallies can be extensively used to inform about Gram Sabha meetings to the local citizens. Recently, Panchayat Resource Centres (PRCs) have been created to access information from the government departments regarding various development schemes and resources and circulate the same to the members of Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat.

There are many informal local community based associations in the villages. Some of them are traditional associations based on caste or kinship, cultural-religious associations, and many new associations like self-help-groups, Mahila Mandals (women's groups), youth groups, village education committee, forest protection committee, watershed committee, etc. formed by government or NGO development programs. A significant aspect of strengthening local demand system is to build the capacity of these traditional and contemporary local associations. For which, series of orientation meetings with these community based organizations, specially designed training and workshops on variety of issues and themes (like structure and functions of PRIs, Role of Gram Sabha, Participatory Micro Planning, Community Based Monitoring, Roles of Citizen Leadership, Group Formation and Management, Self Development etc.) can be conducted on regular basis. This enables the traditional and contemporary local associations to work collectively with the Gram Panchayat and the Gram Sabha.

Pre-Election Voters Awareness Campaign and Panchayati Raj Jagrukta Abhiyan and Joint workshops, seminars, symposiums and research projects with academic institutions can be organized in partnership with local voluntary organizations to work with local self-governance. Finally there is a vast arena of public education for society at large so that different individuals and institutions such as the media, academic institutions, youth groups, human rights organizations and others, need to be sensitized and oriented to the challenges faced by local bodies in building their capacities to accomplish their constitutionally mandated purposes.

Capacity Building Of Elected Representatives

The elected representatives of Gram Panchayat (numbering between 7-11 members) represent a village or a cluster of villages. In addition, there is a Sarpanch - elected as Chief of Gram Panchayat directly by all members of Gram Sabha. In some ways, this body is the first and most direct representative body of local self-governance.

However, Gram Panchayat as a vehicle for exercising representative leadership with transparency and accountability to Gram Sabha is a distant ideal.

i) To understand the autonomous and basic democratic nature of Gram Panchayat as a collective decision-making body, the most significant step is to focus on preparing collective identity and developing a common perspective and intellectual appreciation of the Gram Panchayat.

ii) Gram Panchayat as transparent and accountable local body includes mechanisms for conducting meetings, preparing minutes, sharing information with Gram Sabha, securing participation and contribution of Gram Sabha, developing participatory micro plans, procedures and systems, effective implementation and monitoring of these plans, securing and mobilizing resources and maintaining transparent systems of financial management, etc. The capacity building intervention at this level also needs to address the question of enhancing the material base of Gram Panchayat to make them financially autonomous and sustainable entities. Capacity enhancement interventions in this area particularly focus on mobilizing local resources from the village.

iii) The most significant interventions in capacity enhancement at this level is required to focus on building individual leadership of each of the elected representatives. This is particularly relevant for women, dalits and tribals. These newly elected leaders are experiencing political participation in public space for the first time in their life. Thus, enhancing their leadership roles requires capacity enhancement in several ways:

a. To access authentic information about the system of local governance, their roles and responsibilities and financial resources available to them (women, dalits and tribals) in audio-visuals, folk forms, etc.

b. To provide opportunities for homogenous groups of women, dalits and tribal to share their experiences and to participate in joint camps and big Sammelan.

c. To learn new skills like how to conduct a meeting, how to prepare minutes, how to prepare village plans, how to manage funds, etc. which can be promoted through training, practical demonstration and hand-holding. Therefore, capacity enhancement interventions aim at individual strengthening and empowerment of new leaders in local governance.

Capacity Building Of Elected Representatives On Vertical And Horizontal Linkages

Given different tiers of local bodies, vertical linkages across them and horizontal linkages between different tiers of local bodies and commensurate tiers of local administration are also needed to be strengthened by involving the primary school teachers, village level workers, Aanganwadi (pre-school) workers, multi-purpose health workers, forest guards, etc. According to constitutional provision, all the above-mentioned government functionaries should be accountable to Gram Panchayat. However, this is not a reality anywhere in India so far. Gram Panchayat needs to learn how to assert their rights and supervision over the concerned government functionaries and relevant government development programs and resources. Structured learning opportunities shall be created separately for Gram Panchayat, as well as

jointly with concerned government officials and their supervisors.

Another area of horizontal networking is building relationships and support mechanisms with other elected representatives in neighboring villages, blocks and districts. Capacity building here needs assessment studies for elected representatives to enhance their practical understanding about local governance. In addition, structured educational events on-site support for undertaking participatory micro planning and budgeting exercises, administration and financial management of Gram Panchayat, Informational materials like posters, handbills, manuals in local languages and simplified version of the State Act can be prepared and disseminated among the elected representatives.

Capacity Building Of Government Officials

Firstly, orientation and attitudinal change for government officials at all levels has been a major challenge in working with responsive and accountable bureaucracy. A primary vehicle for bringing this about is through civil service training institutions at the district, state and national levels. This may imply improving pedagogy and quality of facilitators in such government civil service training institutions.

Secondly, capacity enhancement for government officials has to do with specific skills that they may need to work with Panchayati Raj Institutions. For example, in the system of top-down development interventions, lowest level government officials have no skill in planning and monitoring since all of that has been centralized. They need to learn skills in promoting micro plans (including budgeting) as well as social audit and community monitoring of implementation of these plans.

Thirdly, partnerships and joint initiatives can be tried out with state and district level government training institutions in providing inputs on preparing and delivering training modules for government officials and Panchayat functionaries. Many multi-stakeholder dialogues can be organized on various development issues in partnership with local government authorities.

Conclusion

The above description explains the challenges facing effective capacity development for effective local self-governance. Volume of this capacity focuses on promoting participation in local public institutions. Obstacles to such participation are cultural, systemic, institutional and human. As a result, inclusion of the marginalized is a primary challenge of capacity enhancement interventions. Local governance can be made more transparent and accountable to local community only if civil society assertions are coherent and persistent. The interface between strong civil society and effective local governance can be secured more organically if capacity building interventions are properly designed and implemented. Changing attitudes and beliefs is at the very heart of democratic functioning. This implies a culture of dialogue, consultation and consensus building. These values and processes need to be nurtured through sustained capacity enhancement interventions.

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