



Role of Participatory Communication in Decentralized Village Planning: An Experience of SRD Initiative in Murshidabad District of West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Participatory communication is intended to promote sustainable and systematic use of communication in the development process to ensure people's participation at all level of development initiatives. Decentralized Planning means preparation and implementation of development plan by the people for their own welfare. Strengthening Rural Decentralization (SRD) with support from DFID had formally started in West Bengal in 2005. In the first phase of SRD programme, 52 Gram Panchayats were selected in Murshidabad district for implementation of the same. This study seeks to evaluate the output of SRD programmes qualitatively and quantitatively and understand the aspect of volunteerism in participatory approach to village planning. The plans prepared by the villagers were based on local needs.

KEYWORDS

Decentralization Planning, SRD, Gram Panchayat, Participation

Introduction

In recognizing that rural people are at the heart of development, participatory communication has become the key approach for planning and implementing consensus-based development initiatives. Participatory Communication is aimed at facilitating people's involvement in decision-making about issues influencing and impacting their lives by addressing specific needs and priorities relevant to people and empowering communities towards development. Decentralization means transfer of power and authority from the central/ state government to the local level government. Decentralization is closely linked with local democracy. Local democracy is seen as an important force towards transforming local communities in developmental activities. Decentralization enhances people's participation and improves public-service delivery leading to social change. Participation and awareness are closely linked and seen as fundamental to an effective decentralized community development.

The state of West Bengal in India has been a forerunner in implementing the 3-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) System for rural local governance, its history dating back to 1978. Regular elections to PRIs, decentralization of responsibility of implementing various rural development programmes and making the development-bureaucracy part of PRIs are the key steps taken in this effort.

The Department for International Development (DFID), Government of UK came forward to support the ongoing rural decentralization initiative. The programme of Strengthening Rural Decentralization (SRD) with support from DFID formally had started in 2005 following necessary pre-design and pilot studies. The initial phase of the programme (2005-08) targeted one million people in the six poorest districts of the state, focusing on building capacities of rural governance institutions in the planning and delivery of basic services and promotion of livelihood. The second phase of the SRD programme (2008) included more Gram Panchayats (GP) from other districts.

The present study focused on the scope of participatory communication in success of SRD programme Murshidabad district of West Bengal. Murshidabad is the ninth most populous district in India. The 52 GPs out of 254 were selected for SRD intervention during the inception of the programme (2005). In second phase, an additional 52 GPs were selected. SRD initiative was marked as the successful programme in the district.

Aim and objectives

In this case study, an attempt is made to evaluate outputs of

SRD programme qualitatively and quantitatively in order to understand the participatory approach to village planning.

Objectives

- To assess the voluntary participation of villagers in the village planning process.
- To assess the participatory activities of village people in order to solve their own problem without taking any external help.

Methodology

- **Universe of the Study:** The present study was constituted in Murshidabad district of West Bengal. In the first phase of SRD programme (2005) 52 Gram Panchayats (GPs) out of 254 GPs of the district were selected for the implementation of the programme. These 52 GPs are the sample GPs for the study.
- **Methods of Data Collection:** Both qualitative data and quantitative data were collected and evaluated for the present study. Evaluation reports of SRD programme by independent organizations, Government reports and analysis on decentralized planning process, GP documents, feedback and in-depth discussion of the village people and GP members etc served as the primary source of data for this study. Field experiences of the author as a SRD coordinator helped a lot to analyze the progress at every stage from within. 52 GPs were visited at least once by the author in 2008-09.

Findings

In Murshidabad district, Gram Panchayat Facilitating Teams (GPFT), a group of village volunteers were formed in 52 Gram Panchayats. They were oriented by SRD coordinators for 10 to 15 times so that they could effectively contribute to gradually transforming the targeted Gram Panchayats as institutions of good self-governance. A little fund was made available as financial support to the implementation of pro-poor participatory GS based GP plans focusing on both social issues and expansion of livelihoods and also for supporting innovations in strengthening livelihoods of the poorest. The GPFTs were trained to identify their own resources and utilize these resources in formulating village plan. House hold survey, resource mapping and activity mapping were done by the GPFT members with the help of the other members of Gram Unnayan Samity [(GUS) Village Development Council] Through Participatory Learning and Action and Participatory Rural Appraisal methods. The GPFT members were supposed to share their learning with other village volunteers and common villager laymen and to motivate them for voluntary participation

in the planning process. With the continuous support of SRD programme, villagers enabled themselves to prepare GS based GP plans. In 2006-07, 42 GPs and in 2007-08, 49 GPs had completed GS based GP plan.

SRD focused on the establishment and implementation of pro-poor participatory planning, mobilization and utilization of local resources for cost-effective and sustainable local development. The plans prepared by the GUSs were in seven sectors namely education, health, women & child development, agriculture & allied, industry, infrastructure and other miscellaneous sector in adherence to the government guidelines. One of the most significant contributions of SRD, as cited in the report of 'Sambodhi Research and Communications' was to take planning to the household level. The earlier methods of planning used in the non-SRD Panchayats were restricted primarily to the GP level and hence incomplete in terms of outreach, consultation and the analysis undertaken. Planning disaggregated to the level of Gram Samsad triggered involvement of the poorest of the population and increased the accountability of the entire system of plan development and actual intervention.

GUSs started implementation of their first GS plans within January 2007. As per mandates, utmost emphasis was given on awareness generation about education and public health and towards expansion of livelihoods in favour of the poorest and most marginalized sections, particularly women. Majority of the resources were spent through Self Help groups (SHG) for livelihood expansion. The implementation of the plans continued till the end of 2007-08 for the two-year planning cycle. Almost all the GUSs shared a summary of the GS budgets with each household along with a letter addressed to each and every member of the household, inviting all including women and children to participate in the implementation and monitoring process. Replica of the social and natural resource maps drawn by the community representatives at the stage of planning and updating summary of expenditure against the plans were displayed on permanent structures (e.g. walls of school buildings, Anganwadi Centres and health sub-centres) in the GS area. These proactive disclosures were done by the village volunteers. No professional artist was engaged to do it. These innovations laid the foundation for community audit of the planned activities and led to community ownership of the assets generated by and large.

Another predominant outcome of the planning process was articulation of the voice of the poor and the marginalized, mostly through women's SHGs, formation of which was an entry point activity and part of the planning process. In 2007, the number of SHGs was only 174 but within a year the number reached to 317. Implementation of micro level village planning also ensured voluntary contribution of villagers to fulfill the objectives of the SRD programme, 'without voluntary contribution nothing can be achieved'. People volunteered money, labour and materials for the development of their own village. This contribution brought a kind of ownership and established a relation with the process of development.

Concluding Remarks

The concept of decentralized planning is built on a serious assumption, that all key tiers except the bottom one within the governance would spontaneously transfer power and responsibilities to their respective successors. In reality, it strongly contradicts the common attitude, and can be observed in the process dynamics, wherein a specific tier strongly advocates for its power and authority, but is hardly keen to pass on the same downwards.

Former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere had rightly pronounced, "People cannot be developed; they can only develop themselves." SRD programme, tried translating this pronouncement into reality. SRD programme motivated people to come forward and take the responsibility of their own development. 52 SRD selected GPs of Murshidabad witnessed several volunteer activities of rural people towards solving their own problem without taking any external help. Several studies admitted the success of SRD programme in Murshidabad District and it also recorded hundreds of evidences of good practice. It was the common rural people who made the programme successful. Participatory communication method was also used to build capacity of rural people in developing a participatory way for monitoring and evaluating village plan and expenditure system. Participatory communication approach of SRD initiative helped to mobilize people for active cooperation in development activities and empowered them towards articulating and managing their own development.

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