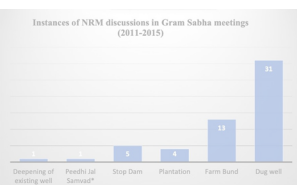




Local Government and Natural Resource Management: The Challenges and the Way Forward

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1. Introduction

Resource conservation and sustainability is crucial for India, with most of the population, especially the poor, being engaged in agriculture or allied activities. However, the recent estimates indicate that the vital resources for agriculture-based livelihoods, i.e., the land, water, and forests, are degrading in India. The Desertification and Land Degradation Atlas of India, 2021 shows that land degradation is increasing, currently, 29.77% of the total land area being affected with land degradation; the State of India Environment Report, 2024 states that the overall irrigation potential declined by 1% during 2013-2014 to 2017-2018, groundwater is over-exploited in several states, and forestland diversion increased by 3.5% during 2022-2023. Decentralised governance is widely considered a promising policy mechanism to ensure efficiency and sustainability in resource management; it is therefore relevant to note that the Constitution of India provides for a decentralised resource management system. The Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution enlists important resource management functions to be devolved to the local governments. These include land improvement, land consolidation and soil conservation; minor irrigation, water management and watershed development; social forestry and farm forestry; minor forest produce; drinking water; and maintenance of community assets. Thus, the local governments in India have been assigned the responsibility of managing

the land, water, and forest resources within their jurisdictions. Looking at the deteriorating status of the land, water, and forest resources in India against the backdrop of constitutional provisions of decentralised natural resource management, it becomes important to analyse the question of how the local governments are taking up their assigned responsibility of managing these resources.

This policy brief explores the extent of involvement of local government in natural resource management (NRM), focusing on land, water, and forest resources, and discusses the factors that influence the same. Drawing on primary data, the policy brief proposes specific policy measures to facilitate the involvement of local government in resource management.

2. Data and Method

Primary data were collected from 13 villages of three Gram Panchayats (GP) of Madhya Pradesh³, India. A qualitative survey was undertaken with 210 sample households in the sample GPs. Focus group discussions (FGD) were held with the elected representatives of the sample Gram Panchayats. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the officials of the Panchayati Raj and rural development department at the village, block, district, and state levels. Minutes of Gram Sabha meetings were also consulted to elicit critical information pertaining to study objectives.

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³ The state of Madhya Pradesh was chosen based on its mid-score on the devolution index (suggesting a functioning decentralised set-up in the state), its agrarian economy and population, and the prevailing issues in the state regarding land, water, and forest resources.

3. Key findings

3.1 Involvement of local government in natural resource management

The Gram Sabha meeting records for 2011-2015 show that the sample GPs have largely taken up beneficiary-oriented water management works⁴, while those relating to land improvement, and afforestation taking a back seat. Although the findings contrast with MGNREGS data, which indicates that the land improvement works have been equally or more prominent in sample GPs, the FGD and the household survey data corroborate Gram Sabha meeting records, suggesting that GPs have focused on water management in their resource management interventions. Dug wells have been the most prominent NRM activity in all the sample GPs. In all, 54 dug wells were approved during 2011-2015.

Further, the qualitative information on the processes adopted to finalise these works suggests that the resource management interventions of the Gram Panchayat are not rooted in local planning. Rather, the GPs work as implementation agencies of the central and state-sponsored schemes for resource management. The Gram Sabha is used for the legitimisation of already assigned targets from the block administration, and in contrast to the policy guidelines, the local people do not get to reflect on the works that were to be undertaken. Instead, only information on targeted activities is provided to the households.

3.2 What factors influence the involvement of local government in resource management?

3.2.1 Capacity constraints

Capacity constraints of GP representatives, particularly the Sarpanch (Gram Panchayat President) were cited to be adversely affecting the involvement of local government in resource management. Initiating a resource management work requires the knowledge and awareness of relevant schemes and programmes, the ability and network to approach the higher officials and lobby for funds, and the financial resources to bear the expenses till reimbursement of the bills. Not all the representatives are capacitated in these terms. The SC and ST representatives are considered much more incompetent due to their limited knowledge, exposure, and resources.

Capacity constraint is a partial explanation as this is also the failure of the state in addressing these constraints

through training programmes; and people's failure to elect a competent leader. The block and district officials clarify that the training programmes are organised for the GP representatives, but these training programmes do not ensure the optimum outcomes due to limited understanding of the GP representatives. Further, the state officials recognise that the state lacks in providing a trained workforce to all the GPs, as they need to prioritise training the GP officials from the critical blocks due to limited funds allocated for training and development. People's choices in elections are driven by the consideration of their own benefits rather than a concern for electing a competent representative. Lack of educated and competent candidates in local elections also constrains people's choices.

3.2.2 Political and monetary incentives of GP representatives and officials

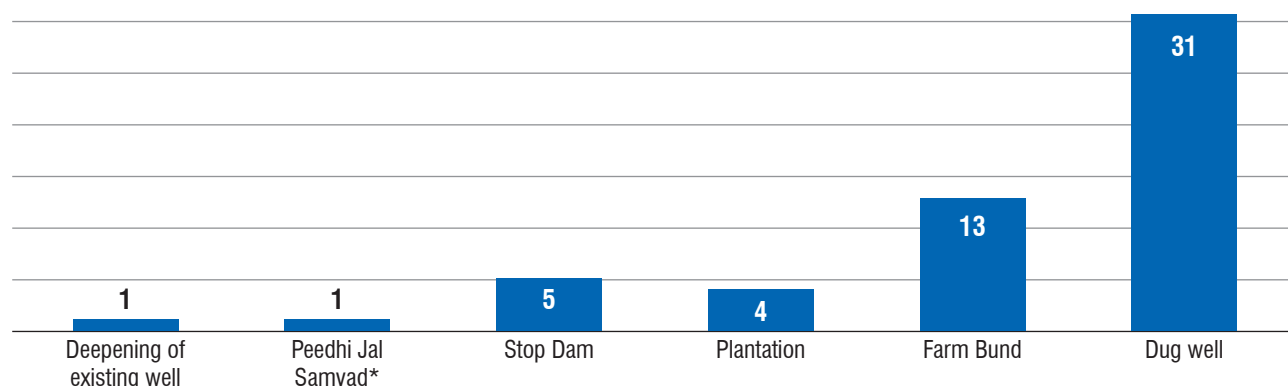
The political and monetary incentives of GP representatives and officials determine the nature and beneficiaries of a resource management activity taken up by the local government. Politically beneficial activities or the activities that offer a larger scope for corruption are usually preferred. It was reported that there is more opportunity to make money in the activities like dug wells; Panchayat therefore prefers the activity. As stated above, 54 dug wells were approved in sample GPs during the study period. No other NRM activity was taken up as frequently as the dug wells in the sample GPs. Similarly, the activities that have potential to cause vote loss to elected leaders are ignored. Monetary and political intent also figure in the selection of the beneficiaries. The people who can either offer the bribe, or are close to the representatives, or form their vote bank are prioritised in the list of beneficiaries.

3.2.3 Lack of local demand and socio-economic profile of the community

Gram Sabha has powers regarding resource management, but the community does not place its demands before the Gram Sabha and this affects the involvement of local government in NRM. In such an environment, the community is a passive receiver of what local government can offer within the wider policy framework. The social bonding between the community and representatives influences the former not to hold elected leaders accountable; low educational levels of the community members restrict them to putting their demands in a formal

⁴ Due to the integrated nature of resources, where resource management works with regard to one resource affecting other resources as well, it is difficult to keep the works in watertight heads. However, for the purpose of analysis, the works are considered with respect to the target issue they intend to resolve (as discussed in qualitative surveys and FGDs) and their most direct and immediate effect on particular resources such as water, land, or forests.

Instances of NRM discussions in Gram Sabha Meetings (2011-2015)



**Peedhi Jal Samvad* refers to the discussions organised in the Gram Sabha meetings where the elderly shared the situation regarding water availability during their time and solutions for the efficient management of water resources were discussed collectively by all those who attended.

Source: Gram Sabha meeting registers of sample GPs, 2011-2015

manner; and lack of information among the villagers on Gram Panchayat's NRM roles and responsibilities leads to the absence of local demands in certain areas. Further, the community's socio-economic profile also becomes restrictive when, due to land entitlements of a farmer (being the determining institutional criterion for beneficiary-oriented resource management activities), local government is not able to take up certain activities in relatively prosperous villages.

3.2.4 Resource characteristics and ownership

Prevalent agricultural practices and resource characteristics also influence the involvement of local government in resource management. For instance, soybean, a major kharif crop in the area, gets spoiled quickly by waterlogging in banded farms, and farmers are therefore unwilling to go for farm bunds. The following structures are unsuitable due to physical properties in certain locations. First, farm bunds are not a durable asset for farmers as cracks develop in black soil, whereas prevalent yellow soil is not easily binding and bunds keep breaking. Farmers are therefore unconvinced and the local government finds it challenging to take up farm bunding. Second, water harvesting structures such as sandbag bunds dry fast due to the heavy water absorption properties of black soil, and the local government is therefore hesitant to build them. Third, the prevailing water shortage comes in the way of local government taking up afforestation.

MGNREGS works on common land are not many because of the collective action problem and non-availability of common land. "There is no common land for ponds and farmers will not donate their land for the pond" is a common concern of Panchayat representatives in all three GPs. Hence, MGNREGS

works are mostly taken up on private land. However, here too, small landholders do not usually agree to build a farm bund or farm pond as they fear shrinkage of total cultivable area.

3.2.5 Institutional issues

As MGNREGS is a major programme facilitating the resource management works at the local level, the convergence of MGNREGS with infrastructure-related schemes, low wages and delayed payment of wages under MGNREGS has adversely affected local government's involvement with resource management. Due to convergence with Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna and Swachh Bharat Mission, the focus of MGNREGS has shifted away from NRM works. One Panchayat official explained, "earlier we were given targets for NRM works ...after convergence, pressure of NRM works has decreased, we show progress through other works like houses under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana in convergence with MGNREGS." Low wages and late payments have caused labour shortage for NRM works. Though the community does not endorse it, local representatives and officials often emphasise that labour-intensive NRM works do not attract labourers given the higher agricultural wage rates. Late payment intensifies the issue.

Further, complex institutional arrangements make any intervention in forest land an arduous task for the local government. For instance, it is difficult for local government to take up any NRM work for SC/ST farmers who are given land on lease by the forest department for subsistence agriculture. The prior approval of the forest department is mandatory to take up any construction work on such land. However, getting approval from the forest department is a difficult and long-drawn-out

process. District and state officials also acknowledge such difficulties at the field level to work with the forest department, however, due to coordination failure at the policy level, it becomes even more challenging to address the issue.

In addition to the issues in the existing institutional structure, the **institutional voids** at times affect local government's involvement in NRM. However, given the planning powers and functions of local government within current policy framework, such voids appear to be influenced by information gaps where community and Panchayat representatives are not aware of the existing schemes and programmes or to issues of ineligibility where there are no policies to take up NRM works for certain groups of people or to the identity of local government as an implementation agency where local government is perceived to be only implementing the policies crafted at higher tiers.

4. Policy suggestions

4.1 Invest more in capacity development

As capacity constraints restrict the local government from taking up resource management works, necessary information and exposure are required for GP representatives, particularly those belonging to the SC/ST groups, to help them take up such works. Further, the coverage of the state-initiated training programmes should be widened to all the local-level officials.

4.2 Adopt informal and participatory approaches in training programmes

Given that the cognitive limitations of GP representatives and officials are indicated to adversely affect the outcomes of training programmes, state-initiated training programmes need to adopt more informal methodologies and should be more participatory. Liaising with the civil society organisations for the training will help.

4.3 Provide a decent honorarium to GP representatives and officials

The key finding is that the incentives matter for GP representatives and officials. Since honorariums and remunerations to elected leaders are low, efforts need to be made to correct this. With the existing honorarium, it is difficult to expect a *Sarpanch*, particularly from the disadvantaged castes, to engage with the Panchayat's work.

Higher honoraria may also attract the educated to contest in the elections to the local government.

4.4 Strengthen the monitoring mechanisms

Monitoring mechanisms at the intermediary and higher levels are required to be strengthened, and a system of checks and balances should be in place, while keeping the autonomy of the local government intact. It is to be noted that decentralisation is not just the devolution to the local government, rather it is a polycentric arrangement to make this devolution work.

4.5 Increase community involvement

People's participation lies at the core of the decentralised natural resource management. To encourage the engagement of the local community, the involvement of people in the finalisation of the Gram Sabha meeting agenda could be a promising initiative. As mandated by the Madhya Pradesh Panchayati Raj Avam Gram Swaraj Act, 1993, the people could add to the agenda decided by the *Sarpanch* and officials. However, if the *Sarpanch* and officials add to what citizens want to discuss, such a practice may inculcate a civic spirit in the community. Further, it is required to address information gaps existing in the community regarding the relevant schemes and programmes, GP's responsibilities, and the proper channels to put their demands.

4.6 Create institutional synergy

There is a need to foster the collaboration among various institutions rather than just converging them, ensuring that the resources are shared for aligned goals. Establishing clear and easy communication channels at each level will facilitate the collaboration and coordination between different departments working for resource management.

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