Applying Organization Development Principles in *Gram Panchayats* to Effect Change: A Case Study

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That gram panchayats *through organization development, including appropriate organization design, incentive structures, and behaviour norms, strengthen and improve local governance and ensure service delivery to citizens at the last mile effectively is being proved in Karnataka and Maharashtra*

It has been over two decades since democratic decentralization was mandated by the Constitution of India. Decentralized governance is a complex interplay of both demand and supply factors. It is as much an outcome of efficient institutional and organizational arrangements as it is about empowering citizens to engage with these institutions and hold these accountable. The Centre for Decentralized Local Governance (CDLG), Avantika Foundation, focuses on strengthening the supply side of local governance, using organization development principles. A strong *gram panchayat*, we believe, can herald a butterfly effect on the development of villages. Our change management framework was developed in action research mode in two *gram panchayats* from 2011–15. It is now implemented in nearly 50 *gram panchayats* across Karnataka and Maharashtra, and is being steadily enhanced through collaborative partnerships, even as we acknowledge that effecting systemic change at the grass-roots is a gradual process fraught with multiple dependencies.

As a first-time member elected to a *gram panchayat* in Karnataka, Vijayamma's is a typical story of triumph in the face of adversity. She was elected to the Oorkunte Mittur *gram panchayat* in 2011, and admits to initially feeling ignorant and under-confident about herself. Being unlettered, she was unable to sign her name and felt intimidated by the citizens and their concerns. She had no inkling as to how she could potentially nudge her village towards any significant development; this would often result in her shying away from the public. Barely aware that *gram panchayat* members are key potential change-makers, Vijayamma, who was elevated as *Adhyaksha* (President) in 2013, is unfortunately representative of many elected representatives across India's six lakh villages.

It was a repeated encounter with many such Vijayammas across Karnataka and the realization that grass-roots elected representatives were unable to deliver their mandated functions that inspired a change management framework for the organization development of *gram panchayats*. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992, defines a *panchayat* as an institution of self-government, for rural areas, constituted under Article 243B. Our key assumption was that a strong *gram panchayat* could improve local governance and ensure service delivery to citizens at the last mile, more effectively. This required appropriate organization design, incentive structures and behaviour norms to enable *gram panchayats* to deliver to their potential.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The *Gram Panchayat Organization Development* (GPOD) was thus designed as a step-by-step framework that seeks to move the needle from one-off capacity-building trainings of *gram panchayat* members to initiating systemic change of the *gram panchayat* institution in an organized and collaborative manner. At the outset, it is important to point out that systemic change is a slow process because it involves re-engineering historically established processes and practices as well as encouraging modification in the behaviour and beliefs of citizens. Moreover, change management interventions need to keep evolving to meet the changing socio-economic realities on the ground.

GPOD was inspired by the Delores Ambrose model of change management (The Delores Ambrose model of change management 1987 proposes that change is successful only when all the components of an organization are aligned.)

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and its basic premise was that random one-off interventions do not bring sustained change. GPOD aims to increase the efficiency of the *gram panchayat* as an institution, even as it allows each individual *gram panchayat* member to develop his or her own potential.

GPOD was conceived in the Action Research mode in two *gram panchayats*—Oorkunte Mittur in Kolar district and Dibburhalli in Chikkaballapur district in Karnataka, spanning 32 villages and covering a population of 15,220 citizens. Elected representatives were themselves at the core of designing the framework, with its success hinging on their ownership of the process. The project was incubated in Arghyam, Bangalore, and since then has evolved substantially, incorporating learnings from the various *gram panchayats* and their staff; academic and research inputs from leading institutes like the Abdul Nazir Sab State Institute of Rural Development, Mysuru, and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai; and the grass-roots experience of practitioner organizations such as the Grama Vikas and Foundation for Ecological Security. In its current form, GPOD comprises the steps as shown in figure 1.

Change management in *gram panchayats* begins with environment building, wherein elected representatives and citizens are oriented to the role and importance of the *gram panchayat* and motivated to introduce change in their communities.

The next phase involves elected representatives and citizens collaboratively developing a shared Vision and Mission. Whereas the Vision serves to articulate values that serve as a guiding principle to *gram panchayat* members, the Mission encourages the *gram panchayat*

Figure 1: Gram Panchayat Organization Development: Steps

Environment Building	**Building momentum and context for change**
GP Vision and Mission	**Building a shared vision as local self government**
Process Mapping Developing	**Shifting from fire-fighting to process-oriented functioning**
Gram Panchayat Organization Structure	**Building accountability, ownership and distributed leadership**
Perspective and Annual Planning	**Developing planning orientation, skills of prioritisation, knowledge of resources**
Hand-holding when Implementing Plans	**Handholding during transition to formal ways of organization functioning**
Strengthening Citizen Engagement	**Preserving the core of democracy:** Citizen is the oversight body

to think of the work areas it wants to prioritize; of how it will achieve its dreams and who are the stakeholders it will focus on. All these steps encourage the *gram panchayat* to realize its potential as a local self-government body.

This is followed by process mapping, a crucial step in enhancing *gram panchayat* members' knowledge of the key processes in select functions such as water and sanitation, nutrition and agriculture, to understand service delivery and identify bottlenecks that impede public services from reaching citizens. They learn about their role vis-a-vis the roles, responsibility and accountability structure of other agencies.

Linked to this, the next phase involves the development of an organization structure that builds upon the structure of the *gram panchayat* as defined in the Panchayati Raj Act. In Karnataka, for instance, an innovative GPOD structure introduced in the Action Research moves beyond the legally-prescribed hierarchy of *Adhyaksha, Upadhyaksha* (Vice-President) and three Standing Committees, to introduce

'Heads' based on interest and skills of *gram panchayat* members. Each Head is vested with an individual portfolio of functions, thereby introducing a system of distributed leadership and laying responsibility and accountability on individual *gram panchayat* members instead of the collective unit of the *gram panchayat*.

The *gram panchayat* is then empowered to draw up a long-term perspective plan in a systematic manner, ensuring that plan priorities are aligned with the Vision and Mission earlier articulated by members. The long-term plan is then dove-tailed into an Annual Planning exercise, wherein *gram panchayat* members outline their priorities and targets for a given year.

GPOD then focuses on hand-holding *gram panchayat* members, to budget for priorities included in their plans, implement the provisions and monitor the plan implementation effectively. This also involves strengthening of institutional mechanisms of citizen engagement.

Concept to Action

In the two *gram panchayats* where the GPOD framework was developed and implemented in Action Research mode from 2011 to 2015, small transformations were recorded from year-to-year, even as it was understood that success was still a long way to go. Over the years, both *gram panchayats* demonstrated systemic and structural shifts in their functioning and brought in accountability systems, all of which in turn triggered positive shifts in other areas of village development.

Unlike most *gram panchayats*, wherein annual plans are often drawn up by the Secretary without the involvement of the elected village

Figure 2: Demographic Profile of *Gram Panchayats* in which Action Research was Undertaken

Gram Panchayat	Number of villages under the Gram Panchayat's jurisdiction	Popu-lation Cov-ered
Oorkunte Mittur, Mulbagal *taluka*, Kolar district	13	7,482
Dibburhalli, Sidleghatta *taluka*, Chikkaballapur district	19	7,738

representatives, *gram panchayat* members in both action research areas took ownership of the planning process. For three consecutive years, members themselves decided the priorities of their villages and instituted plans with clearly accounted budgets. Citizen sub-committees, including the Bal Vikas Samiti (Child Welfare Committee) and the School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) that were previously defunct were also activated through the initiative of *gram*

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panchayat members. This resulted in even more active participation of the citizens in the welfare and governance of their village, as substantiated by a better turnout of citizen members at mandated *gram sabhas* and *ward sabhas*.

Avantika Foundation's CDLG closely monitored over 51 development indicators across 13 key developmental sectors, including health, agriculture, nutrition, water and sanitation among others, through a GP-MIS system that it devised. Whereas there is much scope for improvement, many significant indicators showed shifts, indicating the positive role a strong *gram panchayat* could play. For instance, both the *gram panchayats* developed citizen redressal mechanisms, whereby complaints on streetlights were fixed within a two-day period. Ration shops became more transparent by displaying their stock and distribution patterns. Dibburhalli *gram panchayat* created the highest assets and was the *gram panchayat* with the highest adherence to its plan under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) in 2013–14. Similarly, Oorkunte Mittur *gram panchayat* boasted of the highest number of individual toilets built in the entire Mulbagal block in 2013–14. The outcomes and achievements of each *gram panchayat* were documented in the Annual Report Cards that were handed over to the *panchayat* office.

Significantly, change is triggered as an organic process and is not always uniform in its impact. The organization development of the *gram panchayat* was accompanied by individual development of many *gram panchayat* members like Vijayamma. During her tenure as *Adhyaksha*, Vijayamma emerged as the 'go-to person' for citizens with problems in her village. With a better sense of her role and responsibilities, she was not only empowered

Impact: Improvements across Key Sectors in Action Research *Gram Panchayats*

Sector	Before	After
Drinking water	Fire-fighting for resolving drinking water shortages	Operations and maintenance schedule in place for drinking water systems—complaint resolution within 24 hours
	Chemical and bacteriological contamination in water	Water quality at source tested and results shared with citizens
Sanitation	13% households had toilets in the Mittur *gram panchayat*	Highest number of toilets constructed in the block of 30 *gram panchayats* in 2013–14
Agriculture	Centralized distribution of agricultural inputs leading to skewed set of beneficiaries	*Gram panchayat* facilitated distribution of subsidized seeds
Nutrition	Malnutrition status of children not always known to the *Gram panchayat*/citizens/parents	List of children and their malnutrition status with the *gram panchayat*
PDS	Erratic adherence to norms in flagship programmes such as ICDS, PDS	Two inspections per month by the concerned Head, leading to better adherence

to engage with citizens but was able to redress their complaints as well. "I am particularly proud of my contribution in streamlining the ration card renewal process for citizens. In the past, it required citizens to make multiple visits. I ensured that it was done in one go," she narrates. Vijayamma facilitated the availability of ration to 348 families in 2014–15, and ensured that most ration shops displayed the details of the ration and its distribution, as per government norms.

This wasn't, however, a uniform outcome. There were still members within the *gram panchayat,* who failed to actively engage with the intervention. This only goes to highlight the complexity of the challenges, yet to be overcome.

ENROLLING PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

Buoyed by the visible impact of GPOD in the two Action Research *gram panchayats*, the

Government of Karnataka partnered with CDLG to implement the GPOD framework in an entire *taluka* (Mulbagal block in Kolar district). This pilot was sanctioned as the country's first innovation project under the Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan (RGPSA) for a two-year period from 2015–16.

Gram panchayats in Karnataka underwent elections in May–June, 2015, and the newly elected bodies in Mulbagal have been working alongside CDLG towards strengthening their systems, processes and structures. Since June 2015, significant environment building efforts were undertaken in the form of *Kala Jathas*, focussed group discussions and wall writings to mobilize community knowledge and build a rapport with elected bodies, even as a wealth of data was being collected to baseline the development status of the 389 villages in the block and the *gram panchayat* bodies that govern them.

Fourteen other newly-elected *gram panchayats* in Karnataka's Kolar and Chikkaballapur districts too have been working with the GPOD framework through a network of regional NGOs.

Each of these geographies brings unique learnings that require a deeper understanding of the triggers of change. Like-minded partners are, thus, being enrolled towards deepening perspectives in mainstreaming *gram panchayat* institutions.

Partnerships with leading academic organizations have seen the organizational development work at the grass-roots evolve in innovative ways. CDLG has been working with TISS, Mumbai, since 2013 to develop professionals, who can work with local governments. A 'Young Professionals Programme in Local Governance (LGYP)', which was co-anchored by both organizations, had three young professionals reside and work in *gram panchayats* in Osmanabad district, Maharashtra, to facilitate real-time change in villages. Through sustained grass-roots engagement, these young professionals effected significant changes in the operational capacity and management of the *panchayats,* with which they worked. As a result of this, *gram panchayats* spearheaded results-based village development in several areas, including basic entitlement, agriculture, SHGs, livelihoods, and conflict resolution. *Gram panchayat* offices that were previously locked were opened up for citizens more than twice a week, even as regular interaction was initiated between Village Development Committees and *gram panchayats*. The Sanjha *gram panchayat* in Osmanabad block, Maharashtra, witnessed its first-ever mandated Mahila *gram sabha* credited to the LGYP's mobilization

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efforts. Building upon the success of this fellowship, TISS, along with CDLG, has now initiated an M.Phil programme in Decentralization, Local Government and Development towards institutionalizing the involvement of professionals in local governance.

Another leading development institute, Azim Premji University, Bangalore, houses a local governance clinic with senior academicians and post-graduate students of development, who work alongside CDLG and *gram panchayats* to strengthen institutional mechanisms of citizen engagement. The collaboration, kick-started in November 2015, will not only create a body of rigorous research work but also aims at effecting real-time change in select citizen sub-committees in the *gram panchayats* of Mulbagal *taluka*.

CDLG has also nurtured Knowledge Partnerships, to channelize technical and financial expertise to *gram panchayats*. Experts and/or organizations with specific sectoral focus engage with *gram panchayat* members, to improve development indicators in these sectors. A knowledge partnership forged on education seeks to improve the learning levels of the students in the *gram panchayats* of Mulbagal, even as a water and sanitation knowledge partnership seeks to enable the *gram panchayats*, to develop effective water security plans in the drought-prone Mulbagal *taluka.*

CHALLENGES

Like all breakthrough initiatives, the endeavour to introduce and integrate organization development in *gram panchayats* has not been without its challenges. It has, in fact, been a process of continuous learning.

As the process of embedding organization development deeper in *gram panchayats* grows, the process of building the institutional capacity of *gram panchayats* too needs to focus more specifically on political economy variables such as gender, caste and power dynamics. Traditional practices are so entrenched that they hamper democratic functioning of local bodies, both in terms of their organizational efficiency and functioning, as well as violating basic constitutional principles of social justice and equality. One of TISS's young professionals admits to having concealed his dalit identity for most of his two-year fellowship period in a *gram panchayat* in Maharashtra for fear of retribution from the community and a rejection of his change management efforts.

In retrospect, the capacities of local citizens could have been leveraged more effectively. Skill profiling and experience mapping of citizens in a *gram panchayat* were conceptualised with a view to leverage local expertise and build capital. However, this could not be made operational due to lack of time and resources.

Working in a *gram panchayat* is often perceived as social service, with few incentives accruing to members performing their roles diligently. Their time and resources are seldom compensated adequately. Incentivizing elected representatives is another area that calls for further research and advocacy.

The other key learning of the Action Research project is that whereas GPOD focussed effectively on developing the capacity of Heads created as part of the augmented *gram panchayat* structure, more dedicated effort and resources needed to be allocated to develop the capacity of other elected representatives as well.

CONCLUSION

This article lays out a conceptual framework for the application of organization development principles to *gram panchayats* on the premise that a strong *gram panchayat* can effect substantial change in several development sectors. Our approach moves beyond routine capacity-building training of *gram panchayats* to a more systemic development of various organizational components of an elected body. The process lays huge emphasis on individual elected representatives also realizing their own potential.

The intention is not to create parallel planning and implementation structures that are vulnerable to collapse on the exit of an external agency but on nurturing constitutionally-mandated government institutions to ensure sustainability of any change management interventions.

That the application of this change management framework at the grass-roots has effected positive changes in service delivery to citizens and local governance in the *gram panchayats* has been demonstrated. Indicators over a four-year period have been monitored, even as it acknowledged that there is much scope for further improvement.

Partners who share our vision to strengthen the *gram panchayats* are being enrolled steadily, and several innovative mechanisms have evolved in the course of this.

Change is a constantly evolving process and an organization building framework such as GPOD needs to evolve as per the local needs and requirements of a *gram panchayat* at a particular time. Strong *gram panchayat* organizations will be in a position to ensure the realization of their own dreams and potential and also trigger change in external agencies.