

Strengthening *Panchayats* for Livelihoods

Giving PRIs a constitutional status two decades ago was intended to result in greater economic efficiency, larger resource mobilization, better service delivery and inclusive development leading to higher satisfaction. How far this has been achieved was the subject of deliberations in a workshop. This article is an abstract of the workshop report.

CONTEXT

In 1992, the Indian Parliament passed the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, which bestowed constitutional status on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), with the objectives of decentralizing power and enabling inclusive development. Decentralization was expected to result in greater economic efficiency, larger resource mobilization, better service delivery and higher satisfaction. It was also expected to bring about political inclusion of the disadvantaged sections, particularly women. PRIs offered an opportunity for villagers to participate in local governance and to lay the foundation for a vibrant democracy.

After more than two decades, the reality today is nowhere close to the scenario envisaged in 1992. State governments that were supposed to build this dream by actively devolving funds, functions and functionaries to *panchayats*, failed in their obligation uniformly. Schedule XI of the Constitution lists 29 subjects in which powers are to be devolved to *panchayats*. As matters stand, no state has devolved these powers in the truest sense. Similarly, the structure of *panchayats* (multi-village, large population, representative-based) and bureaucratic control are issues that have held back the development of these institutions. In addition, party-based-politics in *panchayats* have compromised the spirit of grass-roots democracy. In some of the states, MPs and MLAs are ex-officio members of PRIs at different levels; this inhibits leadership at the grass-roots from flourishing. Overall, *panchayats* have not become the assertive village republics they were intended to be.

While hopes arose with the 73rd amendment, the real picture at the grass-roots level hardly met expectations. Villagers rarely participate in *gram sabha* processes or play a role in the preparation and implementation of the socio-economic development plans. PRIs are, in general, weak and emaciated. When PRIs play their role in the spirit envisaged in the Constitution, they have great impact on the quality and sustainability of livelihoods. It is important to ensure that *panchayats* have the necessary capabilities to implement the livelihood programmes planned by *gram sabhas*.

Panchayats receive a large amount of money under MGNREGA but the capacity of the *gram sabha* to prepare and implement plans is grossly inadequate. Similarly, there are many other avenues wherein substantial livelihoods could be generated if the *panchayats* were empowered. Thus, to bring to life the enabling provisions of PESA and the Forest Rights Act in the tribal regions are a great challenge. Activating the provisions of the community forest rights can be a major driver for livelihoods in forest-fringe villages. The *gram sabha*, therefore, is central to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

Even in the face of such inadequate performance, on some fronts positive trends are emerging, taking the focus gradually back to the *panchayats*, and bringing hope for lasting and meaningful change. The mandatory involvement of *panchayats* by the centre in implementing large-scale programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and the BRGF has provided the crucial boost.

MGNREGS is an important flagship programme of the government. It aims at generating wage employment and creating livelihood assets in private and public lands. Even though it is a central Act, its implementation on the field is in the hands of *panchayats*. *Panchayats* are expected to have the requisite trained human resources, adequate capacities and systems, the ability to handle large sums of funds that are channelled to them and the resourcefulness to plan and implement the programme effectively. However, we witness that, in most places, especially in poverty pockets, *panchayats* are not able to effectively

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utilize funds in a systematic and transparent manner. They lack the human resources, the systems and processes, and the technical competency to carry out bottom-up planning and implementation. This is an important lacuna. When executed effectively, these programmes can have a significant positive impact on the well-being of villagers. Similarly, it is possible to see a leadership role for *panchayats* in all central

government-sponsored schemes. However, the concern is whether *panchayats* have the capacity to absorb the allocated funds and convert these funds into well-thought-out activities.

Panchayats are crucial for meaningful implementation of livelihood programmes because the assets such as land, water, commons and small enterprises of the poor as well as the local markets fall under their purview. If PRIs actualize their role, as envisaged in the Constitution, there will be a game-changing effect on the quality and sustainability of livelihoods. Therefore, it is important to ensure that *panchayats* have the necessary capabilities to plan and implement livelihood programmes. Capability enhancement of *panchayats* can be explored at multiple levels.

NRLM aims at building strong institutions of women in marginalized areas to strengthen democracy at the grass-roots. These institutions can act as training grounds for women to participate in *gram sabhas* and be able to express their views and concerns. Women's active participation will lead to livelihood enhancement of disadvantaged communities because they will learn to plan and execute their own agenda through the convergence of various government programmes.

Another important aspect that demands attention is the rights over forests. Even though there are instances of individual plots of land being handed over to villages or communities, the people's right over the forests is still highly restricted, in spite of the fact that the Forest Rights Act of 2006 confers such rights on the *gram sabha*.

Overall, at present, PRIs do not exercise any role in the management of forests, which cover half as much area as agriculture and have a critical impact on rural farming, livelihood systems and ecology. Historically, farms and forests were closely inter-connected, especially in the rain-fed, undulating, hilly and mountainous regions, which account for over two-thirds of the Indian land mass. This link, broken with the creation of government forests during the colonial period, needs to be restored. These are some of the issues that have direct relevance to the livelihoods of the people, where *panchayats* need policy and implementation support. There are a number of remarkable experiences across the country today when *panchayats* have dealt with one or more of the above issues. These are interesting examples that can be studied and learned from.

OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of the workshop was to highlight the various opportunities that the progressive legislation on *Panchayat* offers us in promoting rural livelihoods and the issues and problems. The workshop also aimed to discuss various good practices that exist across the country, including the experiences of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)' experiences, where good work has been done in building capabilities at the *panchayat*

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level, given local, programmatic constraints. Generating policy lessons from these experiences and working out a way forward was also an important objective of the workshop. It is important to ensure that all positive experiences are taken in cognizance which would then help bring together CSOs,

representatives of *panchayats*, government departments, ministries of Panchayati Raj, Rural Development and Agriculture, and other stakeholders who are interested in the subject. The hope is to work out some concrete action steps to build spaces for the PRIs, and to enhance their capabilities in a manner envisaged in the Constitution.

SOCIAL MOBILIZATION AND CONVERGENCE

To ensure that the silent and marginalized sections of the village have a voice, their participation in *gram sabha* meetings and in other decision-making processes in *panchayats* is of crucial importance. One of the main reasons for *panchayats* not being able to carry out bottom-up planning so that the actual needs of the people are reflected in the plans is the non-participation of the people in the processes.

A strong *gram sabha* is the basic building block of a vibrant grass-roots democracy. Under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), initiatives are being taken to integrate the institutions of the poor and PRIs seamlessly. The integration of these institutions is important to ensure that the livelihood plans made by households, as members of Self Help Groups (SHGs), find a place of prominence in *panchayat* plans. Although convergence with PRIs is on the agenda of NRLM, not much progress has been made. *Panchayats* have

29 mandated responsibilities linked to poverty alleviation; this implies that the Constitution mandates that PRIs will be at the centre of poverty alleviation. Both from the state and the centre, there seems to be reluctance in the delineation of power to *panchayats*. In reality, *panchayats* are a marginal player in development schemes.

If the panchayats were stronger, they would have a say in rolling out these programmes and would be able to build synergy among these multiple allocations. Such convergence is not happening today.

The PRI-Community Based Organization (CBO) convergence for programme delivery is essential and there has to be increased involvement of *panchayats* in social mobilization and formation of SHGs. CBOs have a crucial role to play in ensuring the proper functioning of *gram sabhas*. Additionally, CBOs also play the role of carrying out participatory planning among their constituents and ensuring the approval of the same in the *gram sabha*. CBOs are platforms for convergence and as such also have a role in information flow and in flagging important issues. CBOs also act as an important forum to provide social justice. The distinction of authority with clarity of roles of CBOs and PRIs is very crucial. The structure needs to be coterminous.

CBOs facilitate convergence through a variety of ways. First, they serve as the grooming ground for women representatives, especially from socially backward sections, on how the *gram sabha* functions and how issues can be raised. In addition to influencing the decision-making processes in a *gram sabha*, women also participate in the planning process. There are many sponsored schemes at the centre and state levels that are implemented by CBOs, after getting the mandate from *panchayats*, which form the pivot for decentralizing power and need the active participation of the people for effective functioning. CBOs need help in building leadership in the community, which

in turn will help strengthen citizenship.

CBOs help in the social inclusion of the poor, resulting in the empowerment of women, Dalits and tribal representatives, and the strengthening of *gram sabhas*, leading to better articulation and endorsement of rights and needs. These

interventions together empower *panchayats*.

Of course, a lot of work needs to be done to translate the best practices that exist across the country and bring in large-scale change in the functioning of these institutions of local self governance. It might be useful to dwell upon the creation of a national alliance of all the organizations and agencies on the lines of 'Friends of Panchayati Raj', that can provide momentum and impetus to this change.

There are many areas that directly affect the livelihoods of the people, over which the *panchayats* have technical control. But the government departments operate in silos. There are many initiatives of various central ministries such as the NRLM and the Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP) of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), and the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY) of the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), which are also well-funded and implemented through line departments but have an impact on many areas that are supposedly *panchayat* subjects. If the *panchayats* were stronger, they would have a say in rolling out these programmes and would be able to build synergy among these multiple allocations. Such convergence is not happening today.

INCLUSIVE GROWTH — VIEWS OF THE PLANNING COMMISSION

In the recent past, India has claimed its position

as one of the fastest growing economies in the world and it owes a great deal to the reforms that were brought about in the early 1990s. The only question that arises is whether everyone has benefitted from this development. The government has taken many steps towards inclusive development. There has been a dramatic increase in the allocation of funds for the flagship programmes in rural development, health, women and child development, and other departments. In the 11th Five Year Plan, about Rs 700,000 crores were spent on the top 13 flagship programmes. This increased to Rs 200,000 crores per annum in the 12th Five Year Plan budget. In addition, there is a shift towards a rights-based framework. The allocation of funds is backed by increased entitlements of the people such as the Right to Information (RTI) Act, MGNREGA, FRA and Right to Education.

EMPOWERED PANCHAYATS AND INITIATIVES UNDER THE 12TH FIVE YEAR PLAN

Under MGNREGA, PRIs are given a lot of importance because the *panchayat* is the implementing agency. The journey that began with the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India was strengthened with the launch of MGNREGA. The functions which were devolved to *panchayats* are now backed with funds. Under MGNREGA, a very large amount of money is directly being allocated to *panchayats*, affording an excellent opportunity for empowering local self-governance in India. The foundation of participatory development is being laid. The dream is that the programmes will be planned in the *gram sabha*, based on the needs and aspirations of the people at the *panchayat* level. Yet sadly, there are cases of Maoist insurgency, malnutrition and farmers'

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suicides. The dream of bottom-up planning and development is still not a reality. The 12th Five Year Plan, approved by the cabinet, will be presented to the National Development Council (NDC) for final approval; a number of new initiatives have

been planned. We should identify ways to take forward these new initiatives and enable the government to make the principle of subsidiary operational on the ground.

Rajiv Gandhi *Panchayat* Sashaktikaran Abhiyan (RGPSA) is a major proposal in the 12th Five Year Plan. The goal of this initiative is to build the capacities of *panchayats*, to carry out the functions assigned to them. Under RGPSA, there is a substantial allocation of funds. In the 12th Five Year Plan, the largest increase—around ten times more in comparison with the 11th Five Year Plan—is in the budget for the Ministry of Panchayats. The purpose for this increase of funds is to augment the capacity of *panchayats* by providing them human resources—both technical and social, for implementing the programmes on the ground.

The government is creating an enabling environment to strengthen governance and to encourage the participation of people by shifting the focus to the block level from the district level and allocating funds for programmes prepared by the people. RGPSA will also provide systems and resources for transparent and corruption free gram *panchayats*.

RGPSA aims at breaking the vicious cycle of disempowerment of *panchayats*. Weakness in the administrative and functional capacity of *panchayats* leads to low utilization of funds. This further contributes to low devolution of funds and powers to *panchayats*, thus, leading to disempowered institutions. In the north-east

and some of the other states, where *panchayats* do not exist, local self governance systems will be strengthened through RGPSA. Budgetary allocations will be made to states, based on their annual plans and previous performance, which will be measured using indicators for each target in the annual plans.

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also help facilitate partnership among the state government, CSOs and *panchayats*. There is a huge gap between the outlay and the outcome. These gaps cannot be filled without building capacities. There is strong need for collaboration and partnership between civil society and *panchayats*.

MGNREGA is a demand-driven programme, in which the focus is on the blocks where work is needed. The 12th Five Year Plan will provide the third 'F' (functionaries), in terms of a multi-disciplinary team of professionals to the *panchayats*. So far, the funds were given to districts, which were using lot of the funds for non-tribal blocks, thereby, further marginalizing tribal blocks. The focus now will be more on blocks where the ST and the SC section of the population is more than 30 per cent. In such blocks, a Cluster Facilitation team will be deputed, to support *gram panchayats* to implement these programmes. It is proposed that each block would have at least three such cluster teams. The team, based at the block level, will be fully accountable to the *panchayats*. BRGF and IAP will also support inclusive growth at the block level. The focus in the 12th Five Year Plan will be on building capacity at all levels in the system, for greater absorption and high quality utilization of the large amounts of funds allocated to these marginalized areas.

The Bharat Rural Livelihood Foundation (BRLF), hopefully, will come into existence in 2013. BRLF will support CSOs, to leverage vast sums of government funds to support *panchayats* and state governments, to effectively utilize these funds and generate rural livelihoods. The focus of the foundation will be on the nine states of the central Indian tribal belt. BRLF will not only provide grants but will

INNOVATIONS IN PANCHAYATI RAJ — VIEWS FROM THE MINISTRY OF PANCHAYATI RAJ

There are 2,28,000 *panchayats* with 28 lakh elected representatives, of which more than 10 lakh are women. A *panchayat* is an institution of self-governance and is the planning and implementing agency for most government programmes and schemes such as MGNREGA, National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), NRLM, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Mid-day meal, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme (ARWSP), Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY), RAY, Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGVY) and Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme (BRGF). All basic citizen-centric services such as the issue of birth certificates are to be conducted at the *panchayat* level. The *gram sabha* and the *panchayat* have a very important role to play in involving the people at the grass-roots level into the development process.

Despite meager resources being allocated for MOPR in the 11th Five Year Plan, new ideas and processes were still adopted to provide administrative and technical support to states, promote participative decision making and encourage greater devolution to *panchayats*. MOPR also aims at build capacity on issues of livelihoods, focus on women representatives,

strengthen transparency and accountability, strengthen *gram sabha* and local self government, encourage knowledge sharing between states to create replication of successful models and lastly increase interaction between CBOs and PRIs. In the 11th Five Year Plan, MoPR encouraged states to devolve the 3 Fs — Funds, Functions and Functionaries to *panchayats*. In the MoPR — administered BRGF schemes, emphasis was given to decentralize planning. District Planning Committees were constituted to bring forward *gram panchayat* plans for approvals and provide trainings to the elected Panchayati Raj representatives.

AWARDS AS INCENTIVES

Another innovation of the MoPR is the e-PRI scheme to take software applications to the *panchayat* level. Eleven software applications were launched and training was imparted to *panchayats*. By 2013–14, MoPR intends to connect all *panchayats* through broadband.

To strengthen CBOs and increase their level of engagement with *panchayats*, partnerships with resource institutions and NGOs will be encouraged through collaboration under the RGPSA. Women *panchayat* members often take an interest in the activities of SHGs and, therefore, there will be special focus on training of women on livelihood issues. Resource NGOs can focus on training *panchayat* representatives on livelihood aspects in order to increase their awareness of various government schemes and convergence. Joint training of members of CBOs and *panchayats* will be conducted. Integration of SHG plans and *panchayat* plans will help in convergence for accruing various benefits through government schemes. Since 2011–12, MoPR has been awarding the best performing *panchayats*. Awards are being

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used as incentives to strengthen the linkage between *panchayats* and CBOs. MoPR will also help *panchayats* leverage from the initiatives of CBOs on livelihoods and other issues.

West Bengal, Kerala, Karnataka and Maharashtra are considered 'good' states by the MoPR because PRIs are strong in these states. Because powers have been transferred to *panchayats*, people are entitled to demand their rights. There is need to empower women through a transfer of powers and functions, and to increase their involvement in other states as well. Through MGNREGA, each *panchayat* now gets substantially more funds than earlier. This can further grow because the absorption capacity of *panchayats* increases. Human resource is a big requirement. Under the new scheme RGPSA, there is provision for five functionaries for the *panchayat* for data entry, technical support and engineers at the cluster level.

Videography and social audit of all the work and payments are essential to maintain transparency and for monitoring under MGNREGA. PRIAsoft, a software, has been introduced by which all accounts can be put on the Web. It also shows the plans of the *panchayat* and the areas where further work can be charted. Of 2,40,000 *panchayats*, 1,40,000 have their accounts and vouchers already online. The concern is how to ensure that transparency is maintained in accounts and that all *panchayats* have proper systems.

PANCHAYATS AND THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE POOR

Recently, NRLM conducted a four-day workshop on convergence between livelihood programmes and PRIs in Kerala, in which

representatives from 15 states that are implementing NRLM participated. Kerala is a strong example of convergence, women empowerment and strong PRIs. Resource persons from Kerala could help NRLM in other states, especially in tribal areas, to build the capacities of *gram sabhas* and support the convergence of PRIs and CBOs. Mendha (Lekha) is the only example of accessing Community Forest Rights in the country. The lessons from this *panchayat* in Maharashtra need to be replicated in other states and *panchayats*.

A PARADIGM SHIFT

At the grass-roots level, it is necessary that the institutions of and for the poor are vibrant. In tribal areas, it is important to build the capacity of local self governance representatives. Marginalized tribal and IAP blocks are on the lowest rung in development and, in these areas, convergence is very important. States have different levels of powers devolved to the PRIs. In most areas the *panchayat* leadership continues to reflect the dominant social structure of the village. In spite of reservation for the people belonging to SCs, STs and women, the dominant castes control *panchayats*.

There are only two contexts, one in which the *panchayat* has not been given any power and the other in which the *panchayats* reflect the dominant caste of the society. It is important to create a level playing field for the poor and only then can they have a dialogue with the people's institutions and negotiate as equals for their rights in a village. This learning can be taken forward in NRLM.

The vision is of an effective grass-roots democracy and vibrant livelihood institutions

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for the poor in a symbiotic relationship. Ongoing capacity building of PRIs and institutions of the poor, and emphasizing the inter-relationship between the two are a framework for moving ahead. NGOs and CSOs are expected to provide

support to PRIs, in fulfilling their responsibility of implementation, and not become intermediaries. NGOs will provide support in terms of monitoring, social mobilization, capacity building and social audit. In building the capacity of *panchayats*, there should be greater focus on the block and the sub-block levels. Experienced *sarpanches* and *ex-sarpanches* could become trainers and be a part of the resource centres at the state, the district and the cluster levels because, as practitioners, their advice will be the most relevant.

MGNREGA AND PANCHAYATS

CBOs and Panchayats Work Together in Bankura, West Bengal

Before MGNREGA was launched, there was a high incidence of poverty in Bankura. After it was introduced, CBOs began to work closely with *panchayats*, to plan and implement works. SHGs now prepare work plans and present these in *gram sabha* meetings. The *panchayat*, then, takes these plans to the Block Development Officer (BDO) for approval. Based on the *panchayat*-level plans, the annual block development plans are made. In Bankura, representatives from *panchayats*, the government, PRADAN and SHGs hold weekly meetings, to plan work in the area. The topics of discussion include fund requirement, supervision of the quality of the work, fund utilization and whether the people are well-informed about the programme. The faith of the people in their *panchayats* has increased because income has increased, migration has

decreased and children attend school regularly. NGOs have had a big role in building the capacities of SHGs and building systems in *panchayats* for all this to function smoothly.

MGNREGA — A Boon in Jodhpur, Rajasthan

Earlier, people from the Jodhpur area migrated to Maharashtra, Gujarat and other states. The ST and SC villages got lesser funds from the MP and the MLA quotas than other villages. Ever since MGNREGA was launched, work is available within 5 km of the village for developing individual and community assets such as wells. The infrastructure of the village has improved and people have started participating in *gram sabhas*. MGNREGA is a blessing for the people, especially the very poor, who have been included in the relief work initiated during times of drought. MGNREGA has empowered the poor; they are able to demand work and are aware that there is social audit of the works under this scheme. There continue to be many challenges such as the lack of human resources because very few functionaries are willing to work with low honorariums. Corruption is also prevalent in MGNREGA.

THE KUDUMBASHREE EXPERIENCE

Kudumbashree is a livelihood mission, implemented by the Department of Panchayati Raj in Kerala. Women's groups and *panchayats* work together on works such as agriculture, shelter, watershed management and construction of new roads. The integration of CBOs and *panchayats* has benefited the poorest among the poor, through MGNREGA. Priority is given to Dalits, families belonging to the STs among the women. Kudumbashree supports

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the *panchayats* in community mobilization, information dissemination, issuing of job cards, work identification, labour management, budgeting, measurement and social audits. Approximately, 90 per cent of the workforce in MGNREGA comprises women. There is strong planning and monitoring at the grass-roots level in women's groups. As an outcome of this initiative, 238 acres of land in one *panchayat* became cultivable through MGNREGA and resources from the agriculture department. Each family earns up to Rs 20,000 per month. There is an increase in organic farming. In many instances, women have moved from being labourers to being entrepreneurs. They apply for work as women's groups and they get to learn new skills. These groups also act as support groups, in which women discuss gender issues, thus moving towards social empowerment.

LIVELIHOOD PROGRAMMES AND PANCHAYATS – PRADAN'S EXPERIENCE IN FACILITATING CONVERGENCE

PRADAN started work in Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh, in 2007, in the area of promotion of SHGs, integrated natural resource management and farm-based livelihoods. PRADAN supported the SHGs to plan, implement and monitor programmes. This boosted the self image and confidence of the the women, and brought the community together. PRADAN also trained SHGs to work together and implement their plans sanctioned by the *gram sabha* under MGNREGS. PRADAN carried out exposure visits and training for *panchayat*-level functionaries at the *panchayat* and the block level. In addition to this, PRADAN also carried out awareness training of many of the officials in line departments

such as agriculture, horticulture, fisheries and renewable energy. They also attended *gram sabha* meetings along with the SHGs and the MGNREGS staff. The village development plan drafted by the SHGs was supported collectively through MGNREGS and by the other departments. This convergence, based on the SHG-drafted plans, proved to be very effective. Success in village Chhindbharri also encouraged

PRADAN and the departments to replicate the model in other *panchayats*. Thus, in Dhamtari, a model for convergence of schemes is emerging, in which the *gram sabha* and the *panchayat* play a key role. The core learning from this experience has been that for effective convergence to happen, a mobilized and organized community is critical. A facilitating agency is also important to help build linkages and to plan and implement schemes.

THE STORY OF HIWRE BAZAR

For the last 22 years, Popat Rao Pawar has been the *sarpanch* of Hiwre Bazar. Earlier, Hiwre

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Bazar was a drought-prone area, with access to very little drinking water and hardly any irrigation. Most of the families used to migrate. Now, we find that there is reverse migration. Almost 90 families have come back; there are only three families that are living Below the Poverty Line (BPL) and 22 families that are landless in the *panchayat*. When Popat Rao Pawar became the *sarpanch*,

he decided that caste and politics would not come in the way of development. What the *panchayat*, NGOs and government are not able to do has been done with *shramdaan* in the village. The construction of a *gram sansad* building is an example of *shramdaan*. In Hiwre Bazar, *panchayat* meetings are held regularly and issues are discussed in detail. Today, Hiwre Bazar is known for its exemplary work in watershed management, education and community mobilization. In 15 years, the water table has improved from 125 feet to 20 feet — leading to an increase in agricultural productivity. Vegetables are grown and dairy

KEY DECISIONS THAT HELPED HIWRE BAZAR BECOME A MODEL VILLAGE

No tube wells for irrigation.

Only drip irrigation in case of cash crops.

Strict water rationing.

Village land not sold to outsiders.

No entry into the forest without the permission of the *panchayat*.

Soil and water harvesting introduced.

Plans for setting up a seed bank and nursery.

Mandatory in schools for each student to plant two trees.

School-based innovations such as using the see-saw for pumping water initiated.

Total ban on alcoholism.

farming has been initiated. The school in Hiwre Bazar is a model school in the district, in which children from outside also come to study. The Hiwre Bazar *panchayat* has set an example and many villages are growing similarly, with support from Hiwre Bazar.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP MODEL—THE ARGHYAM EXPERIENCE

Arghyam has been working on capacity building in two *panchayats* in Karnataka, with a mission to strengthen *panchayats* as an organization. All the programmes converge at the *panchayat* level; it is this institution, therefore, that has to be strong to be able to implement programmes. Arghyam provides management training to *panchayat* members and officials. This includes a vision and mission building exercise, streamlining roles and work flow of the functionaries, and process mapping in 17 areas of work. Arghyam has helped office bearers and functionaries of the *panchayat* to understand their organization structure, develop their perspective plans as well as their annual plans and has provided hand-holding support to implement these plans. Arghyam has facilitated a distributed leadership model, with sub-committees in each *panchayat*. The sub-committees are protection, social justice, civic amenities and capacity building, and have one leader each. This structure has helped in making *panchayats* more active. The community is now more aware about available schemes and funds.

The challenges faced in the process of capacity building include staff turnover and existence of parallel structures, which diffuse the accountability of the *panchayat*. It is important to create an environment through a policy

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for *panchayats*, to leverage government schemes more efficiently. There can be contracts signed between *panchayats* and government line departments, outlining specific responsibilities. As in MGNREGA, there is need to allocate funds for the administrative needs of the gram *panchayat* such as travel and monitoring under every scheme.

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CAPACITY BUILDING OF WOMEN PRI LEADERS - THE HUNGER PROJECT

The Hunger Project (THP) works in seven states to build the capacity of women PRI members as leaders, to ensure that the socially disadvantaged gets priority. Multiple identities of EWRs need to be kept in mind when addressing their capacity building needs. Reservation has helped ensure the participation of elected women representatives, to some extent; however, a more effective involvement is required.

THP seeks to undertake capacity building of elected women representatives, based on their needs and priorities, keeping in mind the social context of the women. Capacity building is more than class-room training; informal spaces in the community and the *panchayat* should also be seen as providing opportunities for training. In 2010, Jagruk Manch was formed as a platform, where EWR and community members come together to build a common ground.

Another necessary strategy adopted in the process is the training of secretaries of *panchayats*, which comprises mostly of men. There is need to create an effective interface between the EWRs and the MLA and the MP of the area, and also establish linkages with line departments. Moreover, it is important to create an inclusive space for EWRs, where they come together to share and learn. The inputs from THP are well distributed across the dimensions of personal empowerment, technical skills and constituency building skills. Technical skills are imparted through need-based workshops.

EWRs face many challenges such as the stronghold of patriarchal structures, the political environment in the states, illiteracy and lack of technical skills to deal with issues on a day-to-day basis. There is a dearth of sensitive trainers, especially women trainers, who can help EWRs in dealing with multiple identities. THP conducts capacity building in a campaign mode through its programme SWEEP—Strengthening Women’s Empowerment in Electoral Processes, seeking to increase women’s participation as voters and contestants, as booth officers and counting and polling agents.

PESA AND COMMUNITY FOREST RIGHTS — THE EXAMPLE OF VILLAGE MENDHA

Village Mendha in Lekha *panchayat* of Gadchiroli district is a tribal-dominated district, which has been part of the joint forest management programmes since 1992. The villagers have protected over 1,800 ha of forests around the village. The villagers

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have been discharging this responsibility since then in good earnest, with all the families participating equally in the task of protecting the forest cover. Protecting forests is not the only progressive step that the village adopted. The *gram sabha* in the village has been driving a variety of development initiatives. Almost 80 per cent of the households in the village use Deenbandhu biogas plant for clean cooking. A women’s SHG runs a fair price shop in

the village. Women and youth are involved in many micro-enterprises, providing livelihoods to members. Several youth of the village have received training as technical professionals, to implement MGNREGS activities. There is yet another group of youth in the village, who have received training in film production. The *gram sabha* has established a computer training centre with its ‘Village Fund’. Every resident contributes 10 per cent of their income to the fund and each family contributes 2.5 per cent of its produce to a grain bank. The villagers assert: “In our village we are the government.” All decisions in Mendha are by consensus in the *gram sabha*.

On 15 December 2009, the villagers were given the right to manage the forest cover around the village and also to have ownership over harvesting minor forest produce. The forest was abundant in bamboo and the *gram sabha* decided to take over the harvest and trading of bamboo. The forest department, however, objected fiercely, stating that harvesting bamboo can have an adverse effect on the green cover. The officials were not willing to provide the villagers with a Transit Pass. It led to a series of struggles and peaceful confrontation; finally, the Minister for Environment and Forests came to the village

in person and handed over the Transit Pass to the *gram sabha*.

This led to the commercial exploitation of the bamboo stock in the forests around the village, and has also resulted in substantial revenue earnings for the village. The *gram sabha* is now planning to adopt commercial cultivation of various species of bamboos that are technically compatible with the forest. It is also planning to introduce modern post-harvest technologies and provide skills training to the village youth on bamboo cultivation, post-harvest processes, value addition and marketing. Mendha is now in the forefront of the action, helping other villages claim their rights over their forests. Inspired by the experience of Mendha, 783 more villages in the Gadchiroli region have taken control of about four lakh hectares of forest land under FRA.

Even 16 years after the PESA law was passed in 1996, most of the states have not formulated any rules and procedures. There is hesitation on the part of the respective states to pass on the rights delineated to the *gram sabha* in the Schedule V and VI areas. All government departments such as excise, mining and transport need to make their own rules and bring about the necessary changes according to the Act. Today, individual forest rights have received more attention and community forest lands are facing a crisis. Neither the forest departments nor the *panchayats* are focusing on the issue of community forest rights. There has been no qualitative change and forest rights continue to be implemented like the old Joint Forest Management regime. Replication of models, such as the Mendha (Lekha) village, where the *gram sabha's* rights over the forest produce are clearly accepted, should be

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promoted. People should have the right to plant trees in barren forest lands.

MAJOR LESSONS

When the 73rd Amendment was adopted by the Parliament in 1992, it had a vision for local self-governance. The Act tried to create a law that would facilitate the emergence of vibrant village republics as envisioned by Gandhiji. Even after two decades, however, state governments and the bureaucracy have not shown readiness to devolve powers or to formulate rules to truly build these institutions. Recently, due to initiatives such as the MGNREGA and BRGF, *panchayats* have come into focus because these programmes mandate the transfer of large sums of funds and functions to the *panchayats*. *Panchayats* today, however, do not have adequate commensurate functionaries and capabilities, to fully realize the potential of these programmes. This workshop has thrown up important points for all concerned, to ponder over and to initiate action. State agencies, CSOs and CBOs need to come together and develop a plan of action. There are many opportunities available and these must be exploited as best as possible. CSOs and other important stakeholders must come together and work as a network, taking forward this agenda of strengthening *panchayats*. There must be polycentric action in which different organizations play leadership roles. An alliance of all the 'friends' of the Panchayati Raj needs to emerge. RGPSA is a very timely initiative and a great opportunity for us to consolidate our actions.

RGPSA, being launched as part of the XII Plan, is a new national initiative, to strengthen *panchayats*. The ongoing capacity

building of elected *panchayat* representatives, streamlining *gram sabhas*, putting in place systems and processes to strengthen the PRIs at the village, block and district levels are priorities under RGPSA. It seeks to set up cluster facilitation teams to support *panchayats*, providing a big opportunity to NGOs interested in working with *panchayats*. As of now, RGPSA does not envision large-scale collaboration with NGOs. That the MoPR develops guidelines and plans to partner with NGOs under RGPSA is important so that the experiences of these organizations can be utilized to strengthen the RGPSA initiative. NGOs also have to develop suitable proposals and approach the Ministry with ideas for collaboration and possible ways forward.

Panchayats have to be strengthened as organizations. Today they are loose formations, with haphazard systems for functioning and, therefore, not very effective. They have a set of functions and they have to be organized accordingly. Systems have to be designed and put in place. Induction and training of human resources are very crucial. Elected representatives and functionaries, especially the women among them, require a great deal of training and hand-holding support. Most importantly, they have to develop an appropriate attitude, to deal with the issues and responsibilities. The most important process in *panchayats* is the streamlining and strengthening of the *gram sabha*. Wherever CSOs or charismatic *panchayat* leaders have worked in building the *gram sabha* as a cohesive unit and institutionalized processes of participation and decision-making by all, the results have been phenomenal in developing an active grass-roots democracy.

NGOs now need to work pro-actively at integrating the action of CBOs with panchayats, starting with enhanced participation of SHG members in gram sabha meetings.

MGNREGA 2.0 has been launched with a renewed focus on strengthening *panchayats* and also on works contributing to building livelihood assets. New guidelines have been drawn up and 30 new works added. The capabilities of

panchayats in planning and implementing livelihoods have to be substantially increased, and developing appropriate human resources and suitable systems in the *panchayats* is necessary. Equally important is developing the processes for participatory planning, which are crucial to create livelihoods. There are many opportunities here for CSOs, especially the NGOs working on the ground on natural resource management, to become engaged with the process.

BRLF could be another opportunity for CSOs to partner with the government in strengthening *panchayats*. BRLF is an autonomous body, set up with a one-time corpus support from the government, which will be augmented by contributions from other agencies, including the private sector. The purpose of BRLF is to support the scaling-up of best practices evolved by NGOs around livelihoods, governance and so on, especially in the left-wing, extremist-affected blocks. One of the major issues confronting these blocks is the dismal state of governance; therefore, NGOs that receive funds from BRLF will be expected to work on strengthening PRIs. These NGOs will need to work in partnership with the *panchayats* and the state government.

An important lesson to take home is that CBOs and *panchayats* are not antithetical to each other; they are allies. CBOs provide the platform for social mobilization of the poor and the training ground for the weaker sections to articulate their priorities and ensure that they are made part of the agenda of the *gram sabha*.

Further, these institutions of the poor are platforms for convergence and decentralized planning. The existence of vibrant SHGs, federations and other similar institutions adds to the effective functioning of *panchayats* because there will be more participation and initiative from the silent majority.

As for CSOs, it is important that they believe in the potential of *panchayats* and initiate steps to strengthen them. Most NGOs usually prefer to work through CBOs and build very little

interface with *panchayats*. NGOs now need to work pro-actively at integrating the action of CBOs with *panchayats*, starting with enhanced participation of SHG members in *gram sabha* meetings. NGOs also must work in close collaboration with state governments and PRIs at all levels. Advocacy for more devolution of powers and passing of relevant rules in PESA districts are also important roles that NGOs can play. State agencies and CSOs need to work together to strengthen *panchayats*.

This article is an abstract of the report on the Workshop on 'Strengthening Panchayats for Livelihoods' held at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, on 21 November, 2012.