

# Institutionalising Community Participation: The Challenge in Disaster Management Practice

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The paper briefly discusses the need and scope of participatory approaches in disaster management practices emphasising the contradictions, of institutionalised participation. The role of Panchayati Raj Institutions and the significance of devolution of power are stressed. The paper argues for a need to reduce the gap between policy statements and actual practice.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

National and local governments, international donor agencies, academic institutions, political organisations, charity and welfare groups — all refer to people's participation as an important component for the success of specific programmes or projects for development in general. The term community participation (CP) has diverse definitions and represents a range of interpretations and approaches (Gardner and Lewis, 1996; White, 1996). On the one hand, participation is endorsed and facilitated for specific development projects to support the emergence of more effective, efficient and responsive interventions. On the other hand, the radical implications of the oppressed or excluded masses organising themselves and having a voice in the process of development are inherent in the notion of participatory development. Therefore, social movements with emancipatory expressions of people asserting their rights, requiring real 'transfer of power' from dominant, decision-making structures and institutions to people subordinated in the process, reflect a radical dimension of the notion of people's participation. In this context there is a need to recognise the inherent contradictions in institutionalised CP (Chambers, 1994). The government, as well as some sponsors of participatory

initiatives, often refrain from considering CP in terms of social class and power and seem reluctant to seek a precise definition of the term to clarify their own standpoint.

## **EMPHASIS ON PARTICIPATION IN FIVE-YEAR PLANS**

Historically, the terms community development (CD) and CP have been inter-related in significant ways wherein the latter emerged from focus on the former. In India, the term CD was used initially as part of our nation-building efforts to develop basic education, social welfare and rural development. The First Five-Year Plan regarded people's participation as a principal force and sanction behind the plan. It addressed the need for people's participation as follows:

Planning in a democratic state is a social process in which every citizen should have the opportunity to participate and set the patterns of future development. It should embody the impact of public opinion and the needs of the community.

Over the years, it has been argued that for development to be socially just, economically viable and environmentally benign, people's participation is very important. The Approach Paper (India, 2001) to the Tenth Five-Year Plan: 2002-2007, provides several suggestions that embody the idea of people's participation in their own development. The serious deficiencies observed in the implementation of development programmes reflect poor governance. Therefore, reform of governance is regarded as one of the centrepieces of the Tenth Plan. The Approach Paper to the Plan also recognises that improvement in governance can take place only when countervailing forces in society develop confidence to oppose inefficiency and corruption in the government.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION**

In the context of disasters, it has been observed that in most cases, it is the community that provides the initial rescue and first aid. Actions to protect their lives and that of their relatives and neighbours are first taken by the victims of disaster, whether it is digging out people from the rubble after an earthquake or removing bodies from inundated areas in case of floods. Local communities are thus, at the centre of immediate response and recovery activities. In fact, when transport and communication are disrupted, an external emergency response may not arrive for days.

However, disaster management experience in India indicates that relief and rescue operations are viewed as the responsibility of the

Revenue Department and space for public support is not envisaged at all. Implementation is organised in a top-down manner with a large number of government employees and advisors or consultants expected to supervise and advise the community (as was the case in Maharashtra Emergency Earthquake Rehabilitation Plan, Latur). This implementation structure is observed in most government-run development programmes. In disasters, local people are regarded as 'spectators' thwarting rescue measures and are, at best, expected to be passive recipients of relief. The notion of people as partners in disaster preparedness and management is relatively new and involvement of the local population is not yet clearly delineated within the policy framework. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) do not have any role in the present system of disaster management and it is the bureaucracy that takes most decisions.

Experience of various civil society organisations suggests that providing space for participatory alternatives and outcomes improves post-disaster recovery, the efficacy and overall quality of a reconstruction or rehabilitation programme. Therefore, CP in emergency relief, in needs assessment, in policy negotiations and in planning, in execution and evaluation/impact assessment of disaster management must receive considerable prominence to ensure that interventions for relief and rehabilitation translate into long-term development of the affected people.

Ideally, CP should aim at empowerment to increase people's capacity to initiate actions and influence decisions of more powerful actors, to increase competence of beneficiaries in designing, implementing and evaluating project management. Community participation could also take the form of cost sharing either in cash or kind, such as labour. This has the advantage of increasing beneficiaries' stake in the project, and coupled with the other objectives of CP, it increases overall project efficiency and effectiveness (World Bank, 1996). Thus, CP with the above objectives must be an integral part of a relief and rehabilitation policy in the context of post-disaster intervention. A participatory approach to planning and implementation ensures that rescue, relief and rehabilitation plans reflect sensitivity to the culture, tradition, needs and aspirations of the local people.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF INSTITUTIONALISED PARTICIPATION**

It is interesting to note that there is, however, an inherent contradiction in the proposal to institutionalise participatory approaches. On

the one hand, institutionalisation of participation is an attempt to standardise or mainstream participation for replication and uniformity. On the other hand, this conflicts with one of the original aims of participation, which is to move away from rigid, blue print methods for development planning and recognise the 'process' aspect of community participation, rather than view it as an end in itself. Additionally, participatory approaches are time-consuming, could cause delays, sometimes increase costs, and can raise people's expectations prematurely. Striking a balance between macro- and micro-level planning may, therefore, prove difficult. Again, an absence of decision-making capacities in communities may lead to the capture of power by elites. On the other hand, officers and executives in charge of a project may feel threatened as people begin to participate in project activities. They may experience a sense of losing control, as they are not used to sharing power with people.

An appreciation of these contradictions and constraints of participatory approaches is useful. Certain prerequisites of CP also need to be borne in mind while initiating and institutionalising participatory approaches. These include well-defined policies and procedures and dissemination of information in this regard, transparent decision-making structures to build people's trust and confidence in the government, supporting local groups, and incorporating gender concerns into policies and programmes, providing scope for flexible planning and implementation mechanisms, and devising appropriate appraisal, monitoring and evaluation tools and procedures. Finally, strong government commitment manifested in the willingness, to modify internal operational procedures to ensure participation, especially of the marginalised sections, and, to provide the space and time for resolving community conflicts that are inevitable in a heterogeneous community before the advantages of CP become visible, are a must to ensure genuine CP. Participation should not be simply viewed as an end in itself, nor should it be reduced merely to a means. Judgements of what constitutes an optimum level of participation should involve the participating people themselves.

There is a need to systematically and continuously document how CP is actually implemented in practice. Trying to generalise about communities or the nature or quality of participation is inadequate because a wide diversity of factors such as the context, the nature of communities, the gender issues, the agencies — all impinge upon the extent of CP in disaster management.

Again, there is substantial international experience of people's participation in the initiatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in disaster management. However, recognising the difference between CP elicited by NGOs and donor agencies or multilateral agencies (such as UNDP, UNICEF), and the challenge of institutionalising participation through government agencies is critical. This is more so given the fact that personnel of relief agencies come with their own preconceived notions of the nature of help required and how it is to be extended and sometimes with limited sensitivity to local cultures and practices. Non-governmental organisations are of different shades and hues. Governments often project people's participation as being taken care of through the involvement of NGOs. Not all NGOs are participatory in their approach. The onus of providing a broad-based, comprehensive policy framework and the execution or implementation of the programme is on the government. While acknowledging that a series of economic exigencies compel the government to access loans from multilateral aid agencies, social actors and operational issues of public administration deserve equal attention. With a disaster management plan, mechanisms must be built in, to deal with the negative consequences of aid and assistance.

### **THE WAY FORWARD: ROLE OF PRIS**

In disaster management, the institutional structures for relief and rehabilitation should take into account not only the development thrust of the village (or the region), but also build on the capabilities at the local levels and provide scope for participation in decision-making. The move to revitalise PRIs through the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution is a step in the right direction. However, the process of devolving power to the PRIs needs to be expedited so that the stranglehold of the bureaucracy on these institutions is broken (Meenakshisundaram, 1997). The changing role of the bureaucracy, in this context, needs to be well understood/imbibed, especially in the context of major disasters.

It is necessary to consider the orientation of the government toward participation. To the extent participation contributes to greater resource mobilisation and efficiency in meeting technical objectives, it is likely to be accepted by administrative as well as political leaders. In principle, governments of practically all orientations aim to benefit the rural majority. Yet they may fear that new capacities for participation will lead to broader claim-making and to voicing criticisms.

Similarly, some political leaders may fear that more participation by rural people will lead to a loss of 'power'. However, this view, at least in its general form, misconstrues the essence of power, which is the ability to achieve what one desires. If a government wants for rural people what they want for themselves, and if participation enhances their capability to determine the course of development and to accelerate progress along that course, then 'power' devolved to rural communities will add to the power of the government in a positive-sum manner. Only when governments want to initiate activities that are contrary to the interests and needs of its populations will power become zero-sum, and a gain for the public will then be a loss for their rulers (Esman and Upoff, 1984).

## **CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR A DEVELOPMENT ORIENTATION**

Planning experience indicates that the gulf between policy proclamations and actual practice must be minimised. Having a well-conceived disaster management plan alone is not adequate to proceed in the appropriate direction with desired outcomes. The critical role and function of decision structures, the devolution of powers and responsibilities, the integrity of key actors, robust communication channels — must be continuously acknowledged as they have a direct bearing on the nature of rehabilitation and recovery process. Finally recognising existing vulnerabilities of certain populations, organisations working on rehabilitation must reflect sensitively to the fundamental inequities in social and economic structures in order to be effective and inclusive in their interventions.

Relief and rehabilitation experiences in the Maharashtra and Gujarat earthquakes have amply demonstrated the need to ensure flexibility of responses to people's needs and problems as they unfold on the ground. For the government, the significance of a development orientation cannot be over-emphasised in disaster relief and rehabilitation. Evaluation of the recovery process cannot merely be restricted to showing expenditure as budgeted within a time frame, to appease multilateral aid agencies from whom governments may have borrowed. Rehabilitation and recovery processes subsume development processes, which is one of dynamic change. It invariably poses newer problems and challenges and simultaneously demonstrates possibilities of new solutions as well.

**NOTE**

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