



Global Goals and Local Institutions: Understanding PRIs in the Context of Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT

The Agenda 2030 – Sustainable Development Goals, offers unprecedented scope for local governance institutions to contribute towards global sustainability. Local Government Institutions are the best-placed to connect global priorities to local communities. Local governments play a vital role in turning the global vision of SDGs into a local reality. Local communities and stakeholders are crucial partners implementing and realizing the aspirations of the Agenda 2030 as they know individual and collective needs and capacities best (Steiner A.,2017). In this context, the paper attempts to explore the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (Rural Local Government Institutions in India) in achieving sustainable development goals. The paper tries to bring out the scope and challenges of PRIs in the context of attaining the SDGs.

Keywords: Challenges, India, Local Government, Panchayati Raj Institutions, SDGs

INTRODUCTION

This paper is about the role and challenges of Panchayati Raj Institutions in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 (Secretary-General, 2014). There are a total of 17 goals under SDGs-2030, and each goal has a specific set of targets, which are linked to local and regional governments, directly or indirectly. Local government institutions are critical in transforming the global vision of Agenda 2030 into a local reality. Unlike the MDGs when they were first implemented in 2000, there was only participation of national governments, this time the mechanism has been much more comprehensive, involving local governments, civil society organizations, the private players and national, regional and international stakeholders (Secretary-General, 2014).

There have been widespread discussions and consultations happening on localizing the global goals. “Localization” is the process of taking into consideration sub-national contexts in achieving the SDGs, including setting priorities and objectives, deciding means of implementation, and using metrics for evaluating and tracking the development. Localizing the SDGs does not mean just “landing” the global goals at the local level. It is much more than that. It extends to make the aspirations of SDG real to individuals, households and communities, especially those at risk of straggling. “Local spaces are ultimately the key site of delivery and development and, as such, local government is central to the success of sustainable development” (SALGA).

While the Sustainable Development Goals are global aspirations, their achievement relies on our potentiality to make them an actuality in our local areas. In this context, Panchayati Raj Institutions have an important role to play in attaining global goals. Panchayati Raj Institutions are the rural local governments in India having constitutional mandate through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993 (Singh, 1994). So far, leaving some exceptions, PRIs play the role of implementing agencies of the policies and programmes of state and central governments. However, considering its closer connection with people and a better understanding of communities, PRIs may play a much larger role in achieving sustainable development goals. With a greater scope, PRIs also have some bigger challenges which obstruct their crusade towards the global goals.

The paper is structured into three sections, following the introduction, I go to explore the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions with specific SDGs. Here, I have discussed, what can be the role and roadmap of PRIs in context to specific goals (in total 17). I situate this section within the roadmap of localizing Sustainable Development Goals as drawn by GTLRG, UNDP and UN-Habitat. After that, in the third section, I try to explain some of the major obstacles on the way of achieving global goals by PRIs.

The methodology employed in this paper uses a systematic review of the recent works published in various journals, books, and reports on localizing SDGs. While a harping effort has been made to link the global goals with the primary functions of PRIs across different states, it must be noted that the devolution of finance, function and functionaries are not similar across India. As Panchayati Raj is a state subject, there is some diversity in the powers and functions of PRIs in India. I attempt to capture this diversity in the paper.

Role of PRIs in Achieving SDGs

Here, we will discuss the scope of Panchayati Raj Institutions in attaining the global goals in context to each SDG:

SDG 1– End poverty in all its forms everywhere: Goal 1 considers the multidimensional view of poverty and hence it calls for multiple and coordinated efforts. Panchayati Raj Institutions are quintessentially positioned to identify people living in poverty and help them escape it by providing resources and services. Due to their larger role in beneficiary selection (through Gram Sabha) for various poverty alleviation programmes and implementation of programmes like MNREGA, PRIs have wider scope in achieving Goal 1.

SDG 2– End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture: Panchayati Raj Institutions have been mandated to manage natural resources in rural areas, especially water and land that are critical for agriculture and food security. PRIs can fuel the local economic growth and agricultural production by creating and maintaining infrastructures like roads, irrigation facilities, storage facilities etc. PRIs can also identify child malnutrition through the schools or Anganwadi' and tackle it

SDG 3– Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages: PRIs can play a vital role in achieving Goal 3. Clean water and Sanitation are crucial for healthy lives. PRIs are involved in providing these two services in rural areas. Further, PRIs can keep a vigil on the health status of its local community. They can work on spreading awareness among their people about healthy living. PRIs can also contribute towards healthier lives by minimizing water, soil and air pollution through environmental protection and effective natural resource management.

SDG 4– Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all potential: In most of the states, education, especially primary education comes under Panchayati Raj Institutions. This means PRIs have a meaningful role in achieving SDG 4 too. PRIs, especially gram panchayats are well-positioned to identify the barriers to school attendance and tackle it within their communities. Gram Panchayats are also well-placed in identifying the marginalized and vulnerable individuals and communities and ensuring them access to education. PRIs can also play a significant role in spreading awareness among their people about various skill development/vocational programmes offered by the central as well as state governments so that they could utilize the benefit.

SDG 5– Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls: PRIs themselves can be one indicator for the achievement of this Goal. With 50% reservation of seats in PRIs to women in most of the states, PRIs are a mammoth example of achieving gender equality and empowering women. Women leaders in Panchayats can challenge gender stereotypes by setting an example for young girls. PRIs can mainstream gender equality across all areas of their work to tackle the multiple barriers to women empowerment.

SDG 6– Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all: Providing clean drinking water and sanitation are core functions of Gram Panchayat. PRIs have a larger role in establishing and maintaining the mechanism of sustainable solid waste management for their communities.

SDG 7– Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all: PRIs are well-placed for identifying the gaps in access to affordable energy in communities. Gram Panchayats can contribute towards energy efficiency and green energy by investing in installing solar street lights, green energy sources etc.

SDG 8– Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all: Gram panchayat can offer employment to the needy through effective implementation of MNREGS. In consultation with local communities, PRIs can plan for generating employment and fueling growth using the available resources.

SDG 9– Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation: Gram Panchayats can plan and work for the promotion of village taking into account local resources, needs and markets. PRIs contribute towards achieving Goal 9 by strengthening village roads, market facilities, dams, bridges etc. They can also work on identifying the gaps in access to ICT in communities and bridge them. They can construct public libraries, youth resource centres, playgrounds etc.

SDG 10– Reduce inequality within and among countries: PRIs play a crucial role in implementing poverty alleviation programmes. They are the key player in identifying the marginalized and vulnerable individuals and communities and help them come out of the trap of poverty through various schemes and programmes. Gram Panchayats can play an important role in political inclusion. Historically marginalized and excluded groups can be involved in the process of planning through Gram Sabha. Reservation of one-third seats in PRIs itself a big step towards reducing inequality and promoting inclusion.

SDG 11– Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable: This goal is directly related to the urban local government and hence PRIs have very less scope to play any role. However, urban local governments should work in close cooperation with rural local bodies as they are inter-linked for their dependencies of food, natural resources, and labour.

SDG 12– Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns: PRIs can work on educating their communities on the importance of sustainable production and consumption and equipping them with the knowledge and tools to reduce their environmental footprint.

SDG 13– Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts: PRIs have a role of leading from the bottom up in combatting climate change and of raising awareness at the local level. The capacities of PRIs to deal with climate related hazards and natural disasters must be strengthened so that they could protect their local communities.

SDG 14– Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development: Although PRIs have a very limited role in the context of Goal 14, still there are ways, PRIs can contribute. PRIs in coastal areas should develop and implement planning and building regulations to prevent construction in unsuitable areas of the coast. Sanitation and solid waste management are essential to reducing coastal zone pollution, PRIs have lot of scopes to do with these.

SDG 15– Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss: PRIs are sole service providers of water, sanitation, and solid waste management, and they can incentivize behavioural change in our communities. These two reasons bring the PRIs in a well-place to protect the natural resource, biodiversity and habitats. PRIs can facilitate community-based management of natural resources to prevent biodiversity loss.

SDG 16– Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels: PRIs are the closest government to the people, hence they can be more accountable institutions. They seek the active involvement of citizens in planning, decision-making and auditing through Gram Sabha, hence, PRIs can be the best example of inclusive institutions. Due to the participatory nature of decision making and planning, PRIs are more responsive to the communities, taking account the need and aspirations of every groups or community. Nyay Panchayat like in Bihar can play an effective part in resolving minor issues within the societies and hence promoting peace.

SDG 17– Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development: Although PRIs have very limited financial resources of their own, they can utilize their taxation and revenue generation opportunities to finance the sustainable development. Apart from funds and grants from central and state governments, PRIs can develop coherent policies to address the multiple issues of sustainable developments using their resources. PRIs can be a lab for building alliances. They can go for networking with educational institutions, civil societies organization etc. to fuel the process of achieving SDGs

Hence, we can see that Panchayati Raj Institutions have a wider role in achieving Sustainable Development Goals. Based on the roles mentioned in the context of each SDG, the major scope of PRIs in the attainment of the global goals can be categorized into five drivers of transformational changes (Steiner, 2017). Those are as follow:

- i) Sensitization
- ii) Accountability Mechanism
- iii) Participatory Planning and Service Delivery
- iv) Local Economic Development
- v) Partnerships

Key challenges for PRIs in contributing towards SDGs

There is no doubt that Panchayati Raj Institutions have a larger role to play in realizing the aspirations of Sustainable Development Goals. However, there are certain crucial challenges also. These challenges have the potential to obstruct the localizing of global goals. These issues call for urgent attention to be addressed to implement the Sustainable Development Goals:

Capacity Gaps: Huge capacity gaps exist among local leadership. The gaps are in context with technical management, human resource management, financial management etc. It is necessary to identify capacity gaps among local leadership and other stakeholders. “Anew vision of capacity building at all levels is vital to transform governance and ensure that it serves the needs of sustainable development ..particularly ...in developing countries; countries in democratic transition, ...experiencing and emerging from conflict and with limited income (Zarrouk, 2014)

Inadequate Finance: Most of the funds received by the Panchayati Raj Institutions are linked to one or other central or state governments schemes and programmes. Further, they have negligible own source of revenue regeneration. In this circumstance, almost no fund rests with PRIs which they can spend on their discretion. There has to be dedicated and secure funding for PRIs that could be exclusively used by them in localizing SDGs.

Lack of accountability: There is a lack of accountability in PRIs. As they work just as implementing agencies in most of the cases, they do not seem to be accountable to people, passing the burden on state or central government. The accountability in PRIs should be strengthened. Civil society organizations, community-based organizations and other stakeholders can play an important role in this.

High level of corruption: In absence of accountability, high level of corruption exists in PRIs. Strict measures must need to be adopted to prevent corruption. Introduction of social audit is an appreciable initiative towards this.

Lack of access to data and information: Data at the local level is very crucial to support planning and the monitoring of developmental works. Unfortunately, data at PRIs are not readily available. More local data need to be accessed and collected to measure progress, and communities need to be sensitised to the SDGs and the local impact in terms of service delivery.

CONCLUSION

The Sustainable Development Goals 2030 or Agenda 2030 is global, but local government institutions have to play a vital role in achieving the aspirations of the SDGs. Localizing of SDGs is key for its successful realization. No one should deny the fact that just like urban local governments, rural local governments, i.e. Panchayati Raj Institutions in India have a wider role in achieving SDGs. Almost all the SDGs are directly or indirectly linked with the functions of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Thus the success of SDGs 2030 cannot be dreamt with keeping PRIs as isolated. The holistic and coordinated effort is the need of the hour where PRIs must be considered as an important player. However, as discussed, there are several challenges also. To address those challenges, stakeholders should focus on capacity building of local leadership. They should be equipped with data and funds to enable them for planning, implementing and monitoring of developmental programmes in context with SDGs. The proper mechanism should be brought in place to ensure greater transparency and accountability.

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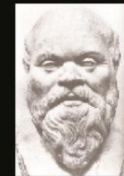
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