
UNIT 16 STRENGTHENING THE LOCAL ELECTED LEADERS CAPABILITIES

Structure

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16.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, the learners shall be able to:

- Understand the concept of decentralised governance;
- Highlight the need for decentralised governance;
- Identify the forms of decentralisation;
- Highlight the importance of decentralised planning; and
- Identify the strategy for capacity building.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

We are aware that almost all the developing societies of Asia, Africa and Latin America achieved independence from the colonial rules during the past century. These societies have undergone the trauma of exploitation and neglect by the colonial rulers. At the time of their independence, they have had the experience of inheriting poverty in all aspects of the society. More than two third of the people live and die under a state of misery. After independence all South Asian Countries adopted centralized Planning, this system has failed to provide for fair distribution of the benefit of economic growth among regions and groups within the developing countries. Decentralisation has often been put forward as a remedy against the concentration of power and as a means of ensuring the needs and expectations of the common citizen.

It is necessary to remember that all the developing societies are mostly agrarian in nature and they depend heavily on agriculture for any marked increase in national income. There is a great potential in agriculture, which can be utilised to assist the overall development. Moreover, increased industrial production is possible by the promotion of rural and village industries, which is, by and large, possible in an atmosphere of decentralised planning process.

Several of the developing countries are rich with natural resources like fertile soil, plenty of water, minerals, etc. In many of these countries, the government is the only agency to meet the challenges. It was realised that an active involvement of the communities in the development process would certainly have positive results. A sense of participation would make people aware of their rights. And

voluntary organisations, which are being formed with a particular purpose, would be able to achieve their goals. The South Asian countries have many programmes leading to eradication of poverty, diseases, ignorance, and prejudices. All these require massive effort. Therefore, the task demands greater participation of people at different levels.

Decentralisation, local level participation, or ‘bottom up’ development are all concepts and approaches that have received great attention in recent times. Ever since, the end of the cold war, there has been strong worldwide pressure for democratic self-rule. This wave has been inspired by the inability of centralised regimes in socialist countries and the third world to deliver tangible benefits in terms of equitable growth, human development and pro-people governance. Economic liberalisation has also spurred the tendency to decentralise with many international lenders strongly encouraging this transition.

For smooth functioning of local bodies, the capacity building of institutions and elected representatives is a must. As on date there are a number of functions having been entrusted to the local bodies, it is imperative that the elected representatives have the overall understanding of the various functions. In this context, the South Asian countries need to further streamline the capacity building of elected representatives.

In this unit we will be discussing the need and forms of decentralisation: we will be highlighting the decentralised planning and identify the strategy for capacity building.

16.2 NEED FOR DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE

The proclamation of representative democracy is often considered to be the first step in empowering people. The second step is decentralisation of power from the centre to state, provincial, and local levels. Democratic systems pre-suppose that all power rests with the people. Practically, only limited powers are transferred to elected governments in the interests of convenience and coordination. This should not be the case and more responsibilities need to be assigned to the lower echelons of governance on the assumption that this power will be exercised as close to people as possible.’ Decentralised governance from capital cities to regions, towns and villages is now widely recognised as a desirable phenomenon. It has some times been driven by ethnic diversity. A consensus has now emerged that all countries should establish effective local government systems to better cope with remarkable diversity and to ensure holistic development.

Decentralised governance is desirable because it allows people to participate in decision-making. It also ensures greater efficiency, flexibility, accountability, fiscal discipline, and responsiveness to local needs and proximity to point of delivery.

However, a certain degree of central control is necessary for attaining macro-economic stability and for ensuring equity to disadvantaged regions and groups. It is a fact that decentralised governance tends to favour expenditure in human development.

However, delegating powers to the local level may not always guarantee that they are shared. In fact, where power is concentrated in the hands of a few, it may further empower elites rather than ordinary people. In South Asia, a common

criticism of local bodies is their domination by landlords, influential personalities and their Kinsmen. This can be avoided, however, through 'positive discrimination' in favour of women and the less privileged classes, allowing them to run for political office and complementary social reforms. Local bodies can thus be made more broad based and representative. Such an arrangement has worked well in India.

The political structure of a country can determine the extent of local involvement. Federations generally encourage the devolution of power, though this has not been true of India and Pakistan.

The success or failure of decentralisation hinges upon the nature of the institutions created, the extent of power and finances delegated, the pattern of power distribution among groups in the regions and the participation of civil society. Decentralised governance, when carefully executed, becomes the most potent mechanism for social cohesion and people's empowerment besides serving as one of the chief instruments of people's participation for advancing humane governance. By decentralising power from the national capital to regions, towns and villages - people's access to decision-making and efficiency in the delivery of public service can increase.

Many industrial countries delegate twenty five per cent or more of the total government spending to the local level. But the governments in South Asian countries remain much more centralised, delegating less than ten per cent of budgetary spending and giving local governments a few opportunities to raise funds through taxation or borrowing.

From the gram sabhas of India and Union parishads of Bangladesh to local bridge construction in the Baglung district of Nepal, South Asian decentralisation efforts have shown some modest success in reducing public service costs and encouraging local participation. By giving local people a chance to choose, for example, ready access to basic education and health care rather than the construction of colleges or hospitals, decentralisation generates political pressure necessary to focus governments' attention on human development priorities. Decentralisation can take several forms, such as horizontal decentralisation, where power is dispersed among institutions at the same level, and vertical decentralisation, which is far more important as certain legislative, financial and administrative powers are shifted downwards to lower tiers of authority. With the huge corpus of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in South Asian countries, some observers maintain that a new kind of 'decentralisation by default' is underway. Like the privatisation of state owned industries, decentralisation is not a panacea for resolving South Asia's perennial crisis of government and underdevelopment. When practiced successfully, it has the potential of contributing a more people-centred frame work of governance by decreasing the distance between citizens and the state, enabling governments to be more responsive to local needs and to make better use of scarce resources for basic human priorities. If decentralisation simply transfers power from the capital cities to regional and local elite-as is the case from many recent attempts in South Asia, it will fail to empower the people and achieve the desired ends.

16.3 FORMS OF DECENTRALISATION

After knowing about need for decentralisation, we will know discuss about forms of decentralisation. There are four main forms of decentralisation. One is decentralisation of powers and functions and finances from the upper level to

lower level within the governmental system. Second is delegation of powers and functions and finances from the basic governmental system to separately constituted public corporations or special public institutions? Delegation of powers to these organisations is subject to certain regulations to a varying extent by the delegating government. The third form is the transfer of powers and functions to private voluntary organisations. Privatisation is usually subject to certain regulations by the government. The fourth form is devolution of powers and functions to a sub-national or local unit of government created or strengthened constitutionally or legally and vested with autonomous powers and resources to undertake specified responsibilities and activities.

According to the needs the country may adopt or strengthen any or all these forms of decentralisation, as it may be envisaged to be beneficial in several ways. This tends to reduce the administrative load upon the central or provincial government, thereby improving pace of decision-making. It contributes to mobilise public support for implementation of local public policies. It would tend to improve efficacy and resource mobilisation and social equity and responsiveness in the implementation process. Self-reliance and developmental initiations among people tend to improve when they are empowered to participate in decisions about public affairs or matters, which affect them. This would lead to improvement in standards of citizenship. The common person has easy access to the decentralised authorities than to the central or provincial government departments.

Apart from above, the decentralised bodies would perform as appropriate nurseries for elementary leadership building. The democrats on ideological ground also advocate decentralisation of powers. People affected by public policies or decisions should have opportunities of appropriate participation in their formulations.

Without clear understanding or too much emphasis upon decentralisation of power and functions would be counter-productive in terms of their expected positive results. This may result in political, administrative and economic discretion and inefficiencies. It might give rise to social inequalities in distribution of benefits of development or welfare promotion process. This may breed corruption and malpractice, besides weakening the process of integrated macro or national planning for economic and social welfare and development.

A well-meaning and flexible balance between these needs to be maintained in the context of changing social heritage, and the political obligations in a developing democratic system. This implies certain pre-conditions for introduction or reinforcing of decentralisation process. Decentralisation should not have functional distortions. Recipient organisations or institutions should have actual or potential capabilities for making proper and effective use of powers for specified purposes and objectives. Appropriate functional autonomy in use of powers for specified objectives should be ensured to the recipients. At the same time, appropriate overseeing or rational regulating power of the delegating government should be maintained. Structure and composition of the recipient organisation or institution should be of appropriately representative character. Decentralisation has a gestation period during which it may not yield initially positive results as expected. Hence, the delegating government needs to have strong political will and positive attitude to help the recipient organisations or institutions to deal with the teething or subsequent problems and issues. There is a much-felt need for basic understanding and essential cooperation between both of them.

16.4 DECENTRALISATION IN SOUTH ASIA

Now we will discuss about decentralisation in South Asian countries. Decentralisation of powers to strengthen rural local government is an integral part of the governmental system in five developing systems in South Asia, as these countries have large majority of rural people living in vast countryside. Politically, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh constituted a unified country before its division between the first two in 1947 and between the last two in 1972. The British Government before their independence governed the erstwhile-unified India and Sri Lanka. During this pre-independence period, modern type of statutory local government was gradually introduced. Since then there have been significant changes in it, particularly during post-independence period resulting in growing democratisation of its structures and devolution of increasing powers and functions and responsibilities to it. There are substantial variations in rural local governments across these countries. For instance, changes in political system and environment in Pakistan and Bangladesh have strongly influenced changes in their respective local governments' systems. Again, adoption of development planning as a national policy in these countries has entailed changes in structure and functional role of rural local governments over the years. Recent participation of political parties in local government has tended to strengthen its political status in Bangladesh and Pakistan. In India and Sri Lanka, such status has already been there over the years.

In Nepal also statutory local governments with partial democratic structure and limited devolution of powers began to evolve very gradually since the closing years of the third decade of the past century. Over the years it has undergone structural and functional changes. However, it is after the establishment of Parliamentary government during early 1990s that the local governments have been reorganized and substantially empowered as democratic institutional set-up.

Because of globalisation, liberalisation, economic reforms and to improve upon service delivery the contemporary world is experiencing profound change in the field of governance and in this context many developing countries are undertaking extensive state reforms including decentralisation of state structures and functions, public administration reorganisation and transitional steps to democratisation. As a result, there is an increased emphasis on the need to address local governments more specifically, since in many countries this has been a neglected tier of government in the development effort.

16.5 JUSTIFICATION FOR A STRONG AND VIABLE LOCAL GOVERNANCE

In order to have maximum participation of the masses, it is required to strengthen the macro level institutional structures. Furthermore, the justification for a viable local government structure gets strength from the following:

There were three worldwide institutional transitions in the last decade, which are having and will continue to have significant impact and change on governmental and economic systems. One of the transitions is a rapidly growing interest in decentralisation of previously highly centralised governments and broadening and strengthening of local governance capacity. Such transition sustains the other two transitions: movement towards democratisation including enhanced government accountability; and increasing emphasis on free market solutions to economic problems.

In the Report of a Pilot Project on Profiles of Asian Countries, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs points out that administrative reform initiatives during the decade of the 1990s include a strong emphasis on the importance of local governments. Good number of countries like, Korea, China, Japan and Philippines are all pursuing proactive policies for local autonomy as an intervention strategy for (a) promoting democratisation and popular participation; (b) delivery of public services at the local level; and (c) efficient allocation of public resources.

Perhaps the most interesting case in support of a strong local government system is the system-wide reform-taking place in South Africa's negotiated settlement and its transition from apartheid minority rule to a democratically elected government. Although strong local government is theoretically justified and in developed countries have played a critical role in economic development and social justice besides institutionalisation of democracy, in most developing countries local governments suffer from neglect and are at most times lost in the shadow of national policies, practices, and efforts at economic growth and social and political development endeavours.

Recent dynamics of globalisation of economic and socio-cultural developments urge for democratisation and structural adjustments as well as market orientation in economy at the national level. And also the emergence of enormous problems of over population, poverty, environmental degradation, shortage of shelter and services, increase in violence, and gender and child exploitation at the local level; and the inability of local governments to combat these problems effectively; have all focused attention on the need for strengthening local government. A new form of local governance is the demand of the day. This governance is through a new 'state', which has been defined quite aptly by Hasnat Abdul Hye in his paper 'Good Governance' one sector comprising local government, civil society (which again is composed of a multitude of organisations or bodies), the judiciary, and legislature (or parliament).

Hasnat Abdul Hye's scheme of governance, 'the new state' is the composite of the state and the rest (including the civil society). It is a kind of partnership between the state and relevant stakeholders. To the group of governance researchers with the Global Urban Research Initiatives (GURI), "governance" refers to "the relationship between the state and the civil society, between the rulers and the ruled, the government and the governed; and it is in this relation of civil society to the state that distinguishes their idea of governance from other ideas of governance. It is the nature of partnership and not just partnership that matters in governance. This nature of partnership may range from tokenism to real or equal partnerships".

The need for a new type of local government is being felt by both the national government and also pushed by the international development agencies (such as, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, European Commission and the U.N. System). The UN commitment to and insistence on encouraging local government was evident in the inclusion of mayors of cities and other stakeholders in human settlement issues, the private sector organisations and NGOs in the official delegations to the United Nations Second Conference on Human settlements, otherwise referred to as Habitat II, or the 'city summit' held at Istanbul in June 1996.

16.6 CAPACITY

In the absence of any developmental vision or commitment to realise a clearly articulated developmental mission, capacity to implement the development agenda remains weak. Administrative capacity is already weak in every state of South Asia, being increasingly compromised by their growing embeddedness with particular interest groups. The growth of such predatory tendencies in the executive and legislative branches of the state, deprived of any motivation or direction from a leadership without vision, appears hardly capable of carrying through any developmental mission to a positive conclusion.

This bleak statement of the lack of vision and depreciated capacity of the executive does not preclude initiatives by particular executives driven by their own sense of mission, to realise a particular micro-objective. Thus, ministers, senior bureaucrats, field executives have carried through their own private agendas such as reforming agricultural extension or building a bridge, accelerating infrastructure development, building a milk cooperative, delivering micro-credit within a particular programme where they have achieved visible results within a micro-area. But such micro-interventions in no way generate sufficient externalities which can motivate their cabinet or service colleagues to improve their own areas of work or transform the face of a particular area. It is not surprising that such micro-interventions are disappearing from within the state systems of South Asia and such initiatives are increasingly being led by visionary NGOs with a strong sense of mission and the administrative capacity to realise such micro-agendas.

Weak executive capacity in the South Asian states is compounded by weak political capacity. In every South Asian state, the style of politics remains highly confrontational. This process precludes any effort at promoting political dialogues to build a consensus behind a development agenda. Parliament tends to be an area for rhetorical exchanges rather than a vehicle for political consensus building. Parliamentary Committees tend to be underused or undermined by the unilateral agendas of the executive in South Asia. Whilst some ministers in some countries may be more cognisant of the importance of building a political constituency supportive of the reform process, the generally confrontational political environment as well as the lack of support for such initiatives from the political leadership undermines such initiatives. Thus, as with the case of micro-administrative success, individual efforts at political capacity building generate few externalities.

The ultimate answer which emerges from our argument states that not only do the South Asian States lack the capacity to realise particular developmental goals but that there is little awareness for the need and hence no initiative is forthcoming to build such capacities.

16.6.1 Strategy for Capacity Building

Achieving good governance requires building capacity as well as applying these principles to existing institutions. New capacity may be needed to help assure the rule of law and open access to public information. But 'capacity building' is a broader concept as well. It includes the need to ensure that diverse social groups are able to get needed information and participate in the making of public policy. It includes the need for vibrant market and a private sector that operates in partnership with government, and for both to have sufficient stability and confidence that they make the investments needed for tomorrow's rural and urban infrastructure.

Capacity building of local governments has traditionally been viewed as human resource development activity. It is, however, realised that effort to train better managers are not sufficient without appropriate changes in the institutional environment. Capacity building is now referred to as improving the ability of the institutions – government, private and community based groups – and individuals within these institutions, to perform appropriate tasks and fulfil their roles effectively, efficiently and sustainably. The dimensions of such capacity building exercise are human resource development, organisational development and the institutional and legal framework.

16.6.2 Strengthening the Local Elected Leaders Capabilities

Effective implementation of the provisions of the constitution, of various countries, on local governance will call for, among other things, empowering the elected functionaries at different levels of local administration with necessary knowledge and skills in the management of local bodies.

It is in this context that training of elected representatives, particularly the first time entrants, assumes significance. In other words, the second generation of local body leadership will have to be empowered to play their role effectively. Since the local level institutions have been entrusted with local subjects by the constitution, the elected representatives will have to play a pivotal role in the management of development programmes at lower levels, particularly in view of the fact that the local level institutions have been constitutionally entrusted with specific responsibilities of preparing plans and implementing various schemes for economic development and social justice in South Asian Countries. As such, an action plan for training of elected representatives of the local level institutions has to be envisaged so as to provide them with the opportunity to acquire appropriate knowledge and skills in different aspects of management and decision-making process.

Rural areas encompass substantial population in South Asia. The South Asian countries are characterised by low-income levels, inadequate to ensure a quality of life compatible with physical well being. The frontal attack on rural poverty needs to be spearheaded through the active role of local level institutions in dealing with developmental issues to reach out to the last and most disadvantaged sections of the society, provide them with avenues of employment, be it self-employment or wage-employment, and to improve infrastructure relating to their life support systems. Local institutions have been entrusted with major responsibilities of bringing about development in their areas through participatory approach. This ensures greatest chance of sustainability as it builds on local capacities, ensures compatibility with development plans and addresses people's needs effectively. The local level elected leaders, in South Asia, are responsible for economic development, social justice and implementation of schemes at the grass root level.

Sustenance of development is dependent on well-formulated training and research strategies. In fact, education and training are interdependent concepts. Development Planning covers a wide range of functions and skills, which include planning, organising, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, budgeting, resource analysis and mobilisation, specific tasks relating to information and communication, etc. Therefore, carefully structured and implemented education, training and orientation programmes are needed for enhancing capabilities of local institutions and building capacities of the elected representatives and officials at the local levels. The major objectives of capacity building are to: strengthen the capabilities of the officials at micro level and elected representatives at local level for better appreciation of developmental needs; stimulate the local functionaries,

both elected and officials, to enlist the support of local institutions, NGOs, community based organisations, etc.; reinforce the skills of functionaries for appropriate need assessment and plan formulation besides effective implementation and monitoring of plans; and garner basic data for analysis to make micro level development action plans. From various angles, the capacity building of local institutions and officials is required, mainly to: make required information of local institutions available to citizens to solicit their support; and analyse the existing situations and identify possible reform strategies.

Through training, education, research and orientation, the local functionaries capacities could be developed. Some of the focal areas could be: Social Mobilisation; Micro Enterprise Development Plans; Bio-diversity Conservation and Sustainable Development; Environment Conservation; Cultivation; Sustainable Agriculture Farm Designing; Designing Participatory, Management and Evaluation Tools; Women Health Orientation; Sensitising Community Based Organisations and NGOs for Development Planning; Non-Timber Forest Products Promotion; Financial Management; Office Administration; Record Keeping and Management; etc.

16.7 ACTIVITY

1. Examine what form of decentralised governance is followed in your country.
2. Evaluate how strong and viable is your local governance system.
3. Find out whether there are any institutions for strengthening of local elected leaders in your country. Mention the type of training imparted by such institutions and also the efficacy of the same.

16.8 CONCLUSION

A discussion on different organisational patterns under democratic decentralisation leads us to a few broad conclusions. These conclusions can be used as guidelines in devising or improvising the organisational structures for development. The following parameters are suggested to judge the effectiveness and suitability of an administrative structure for rural development.

One of the most important parameters in institutional arrangements in the modern times is to build the system on the foundations of decentralised power. A report by one of U.N. Agencies stated, "It is generally recognised that too great a concentration of problems upon the central guidance cluster causes delay, increases costs, reduces efficiency, limits initiative, discourages innovations and cause the cluster itself to become a bottle-neck in the process of development. Further, over-centralisation leaves the various government units, without the authority that is necessary for efficiency and innovation. Eventually, a centralised form of administration must move more and more towards decentralisation and delegation of authority".

The discussion on various aspects to decentralisation suggests that the decentralisation of power should be more political than administrative. The transfer of authority to the lower levels of administrative units cannot be considered as real decentralisation of power. Such decentralisation might facilitate flexibility and quick decision-making but cannot qualitatively alter the nature of a system nor can ensure public participation. This should inevitably ensure supremacy of political institutions over administrative institutions. This leads us to another vital question

namely what attitude the national elite in power adopts towards decentralisation. The political elite who is committed to decentralisation alone would part with their power and create a participative system in which the energies and talents of the people can be harnessed for the developmental purposes. However, the experience of the developing countries indicates that decentralisation of power is possible in a system which is stable and led by an ideologically committed leadership.

In addition, the decision-making centres should be very close to the people. This can be achieved only through well-organised local institutions located close to the people. It can be proposed here that the nearer the organisation is to the people, the more is the effectiveness of the organisation to tackle the problems. All the developmental efforts should be concentrated on a unit, which is accessible to all the people. This type of arrangement would not only avoid multiple contact points but also help them in understanding the development process, besides adding to their political awareness, which is an important variable for development.

The local organisations should enjoy sufficient autonomy in order to be able to respond to the varied local needs and demands. Further, they should be endowed with adequate powers, authority, finances and competent staff. Such a local organisation should be considered as an indicator of a sound structure for development.

The administrative and political structures devised for the new tasks should be innovative. The traditional and obsolete structures, instead of delivering the goods, tend to be dysfunctional. The structure should be dynamic enough to adopt themselves to the constantly changing demands. Therefore, innovativeness of the structure is another indicator of development.

The most important aspect to have the reality of local governance is building the capacity as well applying this principle to the existing institutions and the people who run the institutions. The effective implementation of the provisions of the constitution of various countries on local governance will call for among other things empowering elected functionaries at different levels of local administration with necessary knowledge and skills in the management of local bodies. For which there has to be an action plan for training of elected representatives of local bodies and also a suitable and efficient institution to cater to the needs of the capacity building of the local representatives.

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