

## Europe – India Rural Links

### **CONSULTATION MEETING WITH NGOs ON PANCHAYAT RAJ 28<sup>th</sup> June 2003**

**Rural Links is continuing with our programme on local democracy in India this year. This is the report of a meeting with members of South Indian NGO's that focussed on the role of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI).**

#### **Background**

Europe/India Rural Links is an initiative set up by West Devon Environmental Network (West DEN), an NGO based at Tavistock, UK. The objective of Rural Links is to exchange techniques and ideas between organisations and communities in Europe and India on themes such as poverty reduction, local democracy, sustainable development and women's empowerment. Three NGO's in India, two in UK, one in Ireland and two in Eastern Europe are now members of the programme. In early 2002 a four member team from UK and Ireland visited India where seminars were held in Trivandrum and Madurai on sustainable agriculture and local democracy. As a follow up to the seminar on local democracy at CECSI, Madurai, this one day consultation meeting has been organized at ICSA, Chennai.

#### **Objective**

Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) are becoming vibrant village level democratic institutions for creating needed infrastructure and amenities in villages. It also has the potential to become an alternative to the globalisation process which takes decision making away from the people. PRI have provision to involve common people in the planning and execution of development programmes.

However, for the effective function of PRI, there is a need for sustained training inputs to Panchayat members, Presidents and also to the public who are voters. It has been demonstrated that with effective training, panchayat leaders can function much more effectively. It has also been proven that with orientation and training Women's Self Help Groups are able to lobby for more amenities in their villages through participation in Grama Sabha. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) have a vital role to play in providing required training inputs at various levels of these institutions. This consultation meeting has been called to arrive at a fruitful conclusion to further follow up this work in northern Tamil Nadu.

After the Background and Objectives of the meeting were explained by Jothi Ramalingam, Co-ordinator of the Rural Links programme, Rajendran, PRI consultant presented the scope for NGO intervention

## **Scope for NGOs intervention**

In Central Government we have 545 Members of Parliament - one MP representing 10,00,000 to 20,00,000 people. In Tamil Nadu there are 234 Members of the Legislative Assembly - one MLA represents 3,00,000 to 3,50,000 people. In both cases it is difficult to represent the needs and aspirations of so many people. But in the present PRI system after the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments - 30,00,000 people are involved in the whole of the nation (of which 10 lakh are women, 6.6 lakh Dalits and 2.2 Dalit women), who form part of PRI governance.

In the state of Tamil Nadu there are 12,617 Village Panchayat Presidents, 385 Union Chairpersons, 28 District panchayat chairpersons, 611 Town Panchayat Chairpersons & 102 Municipality Chairpersons. In all 13,249 are in the Rural local self government bodies and 1,04,545 persons are members. One third of these are women.

So Centre, State and Local bodies should form three integral parts of our national governance. Then only the fruits of democratic governance would reach all citizens.

## **Special features of the 73<sup>rd</sup> & 74<sup>th</sup> amendments**

- Ensured the certainty of Panchayat structure.
- Panchayat Raj Institutions are recognised as local self government institutions and considered a stratum of governance.
- Ensured the participation of weaker sections - Women, Dalits, Tribals, in governance.
- Ensures people's participation in governance through Gram Sabha.
- Ensures "bottom-up" planning processes through provision of District planning committees.
- State Finance Commission for ensuring finance to Panchayats.
- State Election Commission.
- Provisions for social justice, economic development and 29 subjects listed in the 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule.

## **Important features in Tamil Nadu State Special Act**

- For every 500 population one village panchayat.
- For 500-5000 population one V.President.
- For 5000 population one union councillor.
- For 50,000 population one District panchayat councillor.
- Allocation of separate operating areas for each tier of panchayat in matters relating to 11<sup>th</sup> schedule.
- Provision of 8% of its income to all Local and Urban self government bodies as recommended by state finance commission.
- Provision of mandatory and discretionary duties for all the panchayats.

- Financial provisions such as –taxes to be collected by panchayat, assigned revenues, subsidies from state government , various income generation measures.
- Allocation of assets to panchayats.
- Monitoring authority over Govt functionaries
- Provision for panchayats to create committees among its members and from Grama Sabha members.
- Provision for Regulation & Licensing power at the hands of panchayats.
- Authority for encroachment eviction.

### **Gaps in the Constitution**

- Panchayats do not function as local self government or recommitted by states as local self government due to absence of clarity of the constitution.
- In several states elections were not conducted properly as stated in the constitution due to lack of specific instructions on matters relating to state election commission.
- Functional and financial powers did not devolve to panchayats due to lack of clarity in the respective article.
- Grama Sabha was not properly empowered.
- Parallel implementation structures of state and central government for implementation of developmental schemes were not taken into consideration in the constitutional amendment which resulted in overlapping or undermining the roles, functional authority of panchayats.
- Actually decentralization of powers has not taken place; only decentralisation of activities takes place.
- Panchayats funds have strings attached to it.
- In some states, the SFCS has not submitted its report.
- DPCs are treated as a body which could arrive only at a draft plan due to lack of specificity in the constitution.
- Constitution is silent about human resources needed for running PRI .
- In the 7<sup>th</sup> Schedule, 5<sup>th</sup> Clause, interchangeable terms used were confusing. These terms undermine the status of panchayats as local self government.

### **Gaps in the State Act**

- Panchayats totally depend on state government for finance due to inadequate financial provisions.
- Panchayats have to consult their district collector on each and every matter.
- The finances allocated to panchayats are very little which serves to meet only the regular recurring expenditure.
- Panchayats were reduced to an agency to implement Central and State government schemes.
- Too much dominance of government officers over panchayats.
- A large chunk of power rests with the district collector.
- Grama Sabhas are powerless.

In view of the above, he concluded by saying intervention is needed in the following areas :

- ✓ Constitutional Reform
- ✓ Policy reform
- ✓ Law reform
- ✓ Networking
- ✓ Training
- ✓ Organising

### **Problems faced by NGOs in working with Panchayats**

Kunasekaran facilitated this session. He said so long as Vasandham delivered Health services such as treatment of TB patients, there was no problem. Even when they started organising women's groups, there was no difficulty. But when they started awareness raising among people on PRI there was opposition from politicians. As a result they were sidelined and some state sponsored programmes were withdrawn. He said there was also no co-operation from other NGOs who are in the network.

Annamali of FEED said Extension Officers in Block level conduct classes for Presidents who do not have enough knowledge on PRI . NGO resource persons are sidelined. Presidents are only interested in knowing the schemes through which Panchayats get funds.

Lucas Babu of RI DO said due to indirect election of Union and District Councillors there is no true representation, and elections to these posts are manipulated.

Ajith Venniyoor of KGSN, Trivandrum said though Kerala demonstrate a better model for Panchayat system and Grama Sabha was involved in planning at ward level, there is too much politicisation of Panchayats in Kerala.

Gunasekaran said in Tamil Nadu we have problems both with politicians and husbands (in case of women presidents.)

NGOs are blamed even when Peoples' organisations take up the issues.

Bimla of Ekta said there is strong caste orientation in elections and Dalits are denied to contest in some Panchayats ( Eg . Keeripatty, Pappapatty and Nattamanagalam Panchayats in Usilampatty Taluk)

Vijayaraman said there is very little response from presidents for the training organized by NGOs and Govt deliberately organise training on the same day to scuttle the training organized by NGOs.

It was felt that it is better to concentrate on ward members and potential leaders for training inputs.

## **Group discussion on Strategies for NGO intervention and agenda for common action**

Facilitated by Vijayaraman, participants were divided into three groups and discussed the above two issues. The following points emerged in group discussions:

### **Strategies for NGO intervention**

- Training presidents, ward members & SHG members
- Capacity building of Panchayats in resource mobilisation
- Voters awareness campaign
- Identification & nurturing of potential leaders
- Local resource mapping
- Strengthening/promotion of model panchayats
- Gender mainstreaming
- Leadership training to the youth & women SHG members
- Developing & dissemination of educational materials
- Facilitating various committees established under PRI
- Giving importance to men also in training programmes

### **Common Agenda for Action**

- ✓ Establishing a resource centre & disseminate information
- ✓ Trainers training programme to NGO staff & CBO leaders
- ✓ Establishing linkages with others working in the field
- ✓ Lobbying & advocacy at various levels
- ✓ NGO Networking
- ✓ Sponsoring of Panchayats by local industries

The group presentation was facilitated by Bimala Chandrasekar followed by open discussion initiated by Lucas. It was suggested that there should be an exposure visit to Kerala to study working of the Gramashaba, particularly the planning at ward level.

In the concluding session, Jothi felt that NGO's limited time and resources should not be wasted in areas where they have limited influence. They may have many concerns such as change of Government, but they should concentrate where they can influence things. If they think training Presidents is futile, then they can restrict training to ward members and potential leaders. He said in the immediate future RL can commit itself to:

- ❑ **Arranging training of trainers (for NGO staff)**
- ❑ **Exposure visit for NGO leaders**

The possibility of establishing a **Resource Centre** centrally will be explored. Regarding other suggestions for common agenda, these have to evolve and he expects to give a shape to these proposals in October when there will be a meeting of RL partners in India.

## Consultation Meeting with NGOs on PRI

Venue: I CSA Centre  
Chennai.

Date: 28-07-03

### Agenda

- |                |   |  |
|----------------|---|--|
| 10-30 am       | - | Registration & tea   |
| 11-00 to 11-15 | - | Mutual Introduction  |
| 11-30 to 11-40 | - | Objective of the meeting -<br>Jothi Ramalingam , CRUSADE   |
| 11-45 to 12-15 | - | Scope for NGOs intervention in PRI<br>work - Presentation by Rajendran   |
| 12-15 to 12-45 | - | Problems in working with Panchayat<br>system - sharing by participants -<br>Facilitation by Kunasekaran , Vasandham                |
| 12-45 to 13-30 | - | Group discussion on strategies for<br>NGO intervention and Agenda for common action-<br>facilitation by Vijayaraman, Network Theni |
| 13-30 to 14-30 | - | Lunch  |
| 14-30 to 15-15 | - | Presentation by groups- Facilitated by Bimala<br>Chandrasekar, Ektha   |
| 15-15 to 15-45 | - | Open discussion - Facilitated by<br>Lucas Babu, RI DO  |
| 15-45 to 16.00 | - | Concluding Remarks -S.R.Jothi Ramalingam   |