

Sahabhagi: **Participatory and Inclusive Governance**

Issue of people's involvement at grass roots in administrative governance has been a matter of serious debate for a long time. The debate has now, more than ever before, been gaining momentum with the people joining the chorus and stressing the need of an effective interface at lowest levels of administrative governance with the local administration with the aim to ensuring better and effective delivery of development outcomes.

If we look back at the process of national planning since the year 1951, we would note that the first plan documents amply called for 'people cooperation' in planning process by the Government. This planning process is not only important from the point of view of creating a consensual mechanism for undertaking development projects and programs but also from the perspective of its stress on better and more inclusive governance with involvement of people in directly impacting the outcomes of the grassroots development.

The 11th Five Year Plan (2007-2012), currently in progress, has been developed by the Planning Commission; keeping the civil society involved right from the first stages of consultation of the Plan's aims and objective. This has been a historic turning point in making of a Plan where the Planning Commission formally engaged with the civil society and its groups to arrive at a consensual model of development. This process of consensus building eventually resulted in plan document being devoted to issues of broad based development and inclusive growth, where the people on periphery have more to gain from the Government's planning process.

The participation of the people in developing the plan document is a bold initiative and thus paves a way for effective interface between the people and the power-that-be at more realistic ground. The partnership thus built ensures better participation between the people and the power-that-be results in better and effective delivery of outcomes and its meaningful impacts on the lives of the millions of people, for whom the Governments both at the local, state and the national levels work and operate.

The partnership between the government and the civil society has, over the years, gone beyond consultation mode and indirect consensus

building processes into policy making exercises both at the national and state levels. The National Policy on Voluntary Sector, for instance, which was a joint work between the representatives of the voluntary sector and the Planning Commission, and cleared, by the Cabinet in the year 2007 now serves as one of the best blue prints of collaboration and partnerships. The case of involvement of civil society groups in development of the central government's flagship programme such as the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission and its subsequent implementation, case of involvement of NGOs in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and Right to Information, involvement of civil society groups in assessing contribution of the civil society to the national gross domestic product (GDP) are some of the leading examples of partnered approach to development which are existing models of engagements and partnerships between the Government and the civil society need to be activated and replicated in other areas of civic development and its governance.

Keeping in view the above context of consistent demand by people of their involvement in developmental issues and need to actualize and activate sustainable mechanism of such engagements, Times Foundation initiated a model of development – *Sahabhagi*, a citizen-government platform; taking forward the formula of effective interface between the people and the power for effectual growth and partnered approach to social development. The interactive and real time model has a strong promise of ensuring sustainable and inclusive approach of collective action as it operates on principles of bridging gap between the people and the power through citizens' participation in and ownership of developmental processes at basic unit of governance.

Narrowing the approach to city development and local level governance, a model for improving citizen participation in effective governance in a city is a crucial one as in long run; it leads to a Government that is more responsive and accountable to the needs of the people. There is also therefore a need to improve the delivery system of the government spending through an organized citizenry participation in all key issues of development. This means that the government needs to ensure effectiveness of various development programs at the level of the ward with help and support of the people from these areas. This participation of people at the local level will also ensure operational openness and have the right people share the burden of the local authorities in execution of the various development projects besides providing them necessary support.

In order to activate an effective and workable interface between the local level administrative mechanism and the people for whom the development activities are directed at, there is a felt need to form an operational structure including the representatives of the society and the people in the following manner:

- a. Mohalla Sabha consisting of Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) and Trade Welfare Associations (TWAs)
- b. Ward Level Committees
- c. MLA Local Area Committees
- d. Lok Sabha MP Local Area Committees
- e. State Level Committee and,
- f. Integration of all these Committees

The above structure has been proposed keeping in view a bottom up approach which not only brings people and the power together at one common platform but also paves an effective path for lateral grievance handling mechanism by the local administrative authorities in a ward through a transparent process of engagement with the people who seek issues of development at local level sorted out by their representatives. It is also proposed that the *Mohalla Sabha* consisting of RWAs and TWAs function in a manner that have bottom up approach in reaching people and providing a satisfactory result of the peoples grievances in the following manner

Mohalla Sabha RWA Committee

Each polling booth (*Mohalla Sabha*) has approx 1000-1200 voters. Authentic list of all residents (adults) is available with the Election Commission. As far as possible, an RWA should be formed for each booth, if not formed already. Meeting of the committee should be held every month on the first Saturday or any other day of the week as may be decided. One week before the meeting, a notice would be send to all the members to attend the meeting. Minutes of the meeting will be made and action taken report (ATR) placed in the next meeting. Committee will work as under.

1. It would decide on the immediate, short term and long term issues of the area.
2. Every month it meets to decide the issue of the area and will decide on the works to be carried out.
3. Details of all works to be carried out in the area are given to the committee by the authorities. Quality of work is monitored by the committee and progress/variation/violation reported

to the Wards Committee. Any unsatisfactory finding by committee results in stoppage of payment to contractor.

4. The committee decides on all the issues to be forwarded to the Ward Committee.
5. Election to this committee is held every year and one representative is nominated to the Ward Committee.
6. This Committee is used for disseminating information on government schemes.
7. This Committee maintains a complaint/suggestion register for all the departments. Government department representatives collect the complaints/suggestions regularly. Alternatively a mechanism can be evolved to dispatch/forward these complaints suggestion to the concerned departments and copy is sent to Ward Committee.

Likewise the other committees, referred above, would meet periodically and resolve issues at their respective levels through participatory governance.

This structure will not only be good for the citizens but will also be beneficial to the elected representatives as they would have an opportunity to interact with their constituency regularly. It is often seen that national issues become a matter of discussion and concern in state/municipal elections and municipal issues often become a matter of concern in state/national elections. As a result, a citizen often votes in municipal elections based national/state issues whereas the candidate's evaluation on relevant issues takes a back seat and vice – versa. Thus a model of governance which integrates people in a *Mohalla Sabha* with Ward (Councilor), Assembly, Lok Sabha and the city is the need of the hour as it will also effectively empower the citizens.

To make the proposed structure more functional, it is further proposed that there be an Enactment of RWA Act or amendment of Societies Registration Act 1860 to effectively guide and enable working and operations of the RWAs. This will have a legal backing to the RWAs and its work through the proposed structure.

The principle of *Sahabhagi* aims to only supplement ongoing initiatives of the Government and provide a neutral platform to both the local administrative machinery and the common people to come together on one common platform. This builds a cutting edge interface between the local bodies and the people to understand each others' needs and take development initiatives accordingly. The *Sahabhagi*

principles do not compete with existing systems but complement; and rather provide an edge of citizen participation in a development project. Additionally, the model supports the good work being carried out by the local bodies with the promise of ensuring an accountable and tractable performance of the delivery through a robust system of citizens' audit inbuilt in the overall approach.

As it is a citizen's initiative and underscores the value of partnership, the model will create a new platform between the existing system and its supplementation by the people who are part of the local area development. Given the current context and embedding of various instruments that calls for people's participation, the model would by and large guarantee the people becoming a part of the development process and more importantly part of the solution. This will help us build together a society that is rooted in the principles of equity, justice and progress.

In closing, the level of success and delivery outcome through the proposed model finally depends on how much the government and the people open up to each other to win each other's confidence to try and work towards an equitable and just system that is not only participatory in approach but also inclusive in nature.

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