Local Governments in Rural West Bengal, India and their Coordination with Line Departments

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Abstract[1]

In India, the 73rd constitutional amendment of 1992 decentralises agriculture, irrigation, health, education along with 23 other items to the Panchayats, the village level self-government body. It is envisaged that the three-tier Panchayat system at the District, Block and the Village level would coordinate with different 'line departments' of the government for planning various schemes and their implementation. In West Bengal, a state in eastern India, where the Panchayats were revitalised before the constitutional amendment, the initial years were marked by strong coordination between the Panchayats and other departments,

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especially land and agriculture, making West Bengal a 'model' case for the Panchayats. However, where service delivery through the Panchayats has been criticised in recent years, the disjuncture between Panchayats and the line departments is a cause for alarm. In this paper, we search for the causes behind the low level of coordination between government departments and the Panchayat at each tier. We analyse the complex process of organisational coordination that characterises decentralisation, and show how decision making in local governments is nested within various levels of hierarchy. The study focuses on the formal structures of coordination and control with regard to decision-making between the Panchayats and the line departments. We show how these processes work out in practice. These involve lack of role definition, problems of accountability, and politics over access to resources and relations of power within, as well as outside, the Panchayat.

Keywords: Architecture of Local Governance, Organisational Network, Inter-departmental Coordination

1.   Introduction

Where "inter-institutional harmony is of the utmost importance" (Geldenhuys 2008), effective service delivery by government institutions should draw on unique local structures. This is an outcome of three fold pressure: a need for specialised government organisations to work together, providing government services through a single window, and the importance of addressing local needs in synergy (Goss 2001). Goss (*Ibid*) argues that this coordination calls for "public bodies [to] purchase services from other public, voluntary or private organisations" which demands considerable emphasis on strategic planning and "in many cases shared delivery systems still do not work smoothly". The nature and success of coordination is one of the determining factors of organisational effectiveness (Crowston 1997; Stokes & Hewitt 1976; Thompson 1967). With an appreciation of the need for inter-governmental coordination, the present paper seeks to address what is happening at the operational level of inter-governmental relations and how this can be improved in order to achieve the policy goals of effective service delivery in West Bengal, through 'line departments': rural local governments – the Panchayats – and government departments such as education, health, public works etc., which are supposed to work 'in line' with the local governments – hence their name. The case of West Bengal is not typical because

decentralisation has been effectively pursued, so problems here indicate broader issues that need to be addressed.

2.   Intergovernmental Relations: Existing Perspectives

Government institutions have a complex nature, with actors often having multiple cultural backgrounds, and where the system lacks normative underpinning in public opinion. Consequently, the system requires strong coordination (Miller & Dickson 1996). One approach is to understand intergovernmental relations through descriptive analysis aimed at identifying:

- the nature of governmental units;
- the nature of officials and their attitudes, perceptions and roles;
- patterns of interaction;
- the range of officials involved – elected representatives and appointed officials for example, and policies to be implemented (Wright 1988).

A second approach looks analytically at historical trends in relations among governments (Conlan 1988) and identifies distinctive features in a given historical phase (Grodzins 1966; Stewart 1984).

A third "Community Power" approach (Krane & Wright 2000, p. 86) addresses the ways in which local government officials exercise political power.

Enhancement of inter-organisational linkages should involve careful observation of institutional environments, procedural and structural aspects, and subjective dimensions. Therefore, an effective design for coordination should see an organisation as an open system affected by its environment (Scott 1992). Furthermore, it is vulnerable to its context especially in dealing with issues of information processing, which ought to match the institutional environmental demands (Tushman & Nadler 1978). The interdependence of the parts within the organisational whole is a challenge to institutional collaboration, as it enhances role confusion and complexity of the system (Lawrence & Lorsch 1967; Thompson 1967). In larger systems, coordination is not practicable through simple group meetings (Galbraith 1973; Kiesler *et al.*1994; Thompson 1967 ; Van de Ven *et al.* 1974), as the

structures and processes are interwoven. The components of linkages, like ongoing conversations, discourse, shared human experiences and interaction patterns (Foucault 1971; Schutz 1967; Weick 1979), create meaning, social worlds, norms, shared interpretive schemes, understanding, common rituals and knowledge, coordination, and social order (Bechky 2003; Habermas 1984; Schein 1992; Wageman 1995; Weick 1993; Schutz 1967; Chwe 2001; Hutchins 1990; Weick *et al.* 1993; Polanyi 1975).

We need to look carefully at these issues to understand their processes and how they are embedded within the structure. Therefore, for designing an effective strategy of coordination, due emphasis should be given to the subjective dimensions (Bastien & Hostager 2001), including mental models, frameworks and scripts (Weick 1995; Gioia & Poole 1984; Levesque *et al.* 2001), knowledge (Adler & Borys 1996; Hutchins 1991), shared meaning/mutually shared fields (Kickert *et al.* 1997, Weick *et al.* 1993), and rules and resources (Giddens 1984).

However, we realise that management of networks is not restricted to achievement of inter-organisational coordination alone. It "involves the application of applied behavioural science techniques such as team building, conflict resolution skill, and coordinating abilities" (Agranoff & McGuire 1999, p. 109-10). The success of the network depends both on how far the network manager has taken care of the technical, legal and political dimensions (Ibid, p. 107-8) and on the extent to which she adopts a meta-governance approach. Thus, only persons who have the capacity to handle this diverse array of tasks are suitable for the role of a network manager. The introduction of these actors result in the creation of a heterogeneous network comprising local governments and other departments that not only differ in structure and culture but also in terms of goal, power and relationship with society (Klijn 2005). Also, while selectively activating the network one should be extremely careful about two factors: which actors are selected (and who are not selected), and what information is shared (Kickert *et al.* 1997, p. 47).

3.   Approach and Methodology

While attempting to understand the operational level of intergovernmental coordination of the Panchayat system of West Bengal, we use both descriptive and analytic approaches,

which are backed by field narratives inspired by the community power approach. We studied policy documents and activity maps in order to gain insights about mechanisms of coordination as established. We have done fieldwork in six District offices and twelve Block offices (sub-district) by selecting two from each of the districts. We studied a total of twenty four Village Panchayats, selecting two from each of the Blocks to analyse problems faced by the officials due to lack of co-ordination. The paper therefore contains a descriptive presentation of policies designed to strengthen coordination, identifies gaps, and presents systemic problems and their operational consequences . Analysis of the reasons for failure of coordination analysed through studying the complex organisational structures.

The Indian context

In India, the 73rd constitutional amendment of 1992, which received presidential assent early in 1993, recommended decentralisation of twenty-seven areas of government jurisdiction, including agriculture, irrigation, health, and education to the Panchayats, the village level self-government body.[2] It was envisaged that the three-tier Panchayat system at the District, Block and the Village level would coordinate with different 'line departments' of the government for planning and implementation of various schemes. To strengthen the initiative, sector wide sub-committees at Village level, and standing committees at Block level and District level, were constituted. At present, ten standing committees work on different topics, including issues of infrastructure and empowerment where elected representatives and officials from concerned 'line departments' work together (P&RD, GoWB 2009). The local government system demands vertical coordination with different tiers and horizontal coordination with 'line departments'.

The system is prone to interdepartmental incompatibilities, when departments with different business goals have to work together. The local government manager formulates the goal, identifies the potential partners and creates the network for their project management (Meuleman 2008). Coordination becomes a big challenge (Thompson 1967) because a) the chance of blurring of boundaries and responsibilities for tackling social and economic issues (Putnam 1993), and b) ambiguities about the roles played by different stakeholders increases (Alper *et al.* 1998; Blake & Mouton 1970; Broadbent *et al.* 1996; Lax & Sebenius 1986).

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[2] Most state governments have not devolved all 27 subjects.

The system is prone to power struggles and opportunistic behaviour (Hirchman 1991) where inter-organisational coordination requires careful manufacturing of 'rules of the game' to blend capacities of stakeholders to meet their organisational objectives (Jessop 1996). If the organisation fails to design an effective mechanism for interdepartmental coordination, constructive negotiation and stakeholders' willingness to engage in problem-solving behaviour becomes crucial (De Dreu *et al.* 1999; Fisher & Ury 1981; Rubin *et al.* 1994; Thomas 1992; Tjosvold 1991; Van de Vliert *et al.* 1997). This achieved when employees take into account both the goals of their own department, and also the goals of other departments (Blake & Mouton 1970; Rubin *et al.* 1994; Thomas 1976).

Intergovernmental relations in operation

The local government system therefore needs better information flows between various stakeholders and better management of complexity, since the system is large and tasks are cumbersome.

The need for coordination is also recognised by the Government of India. The recent *Annual Plan*[3] emphasises the need for inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral linkages, and adjustments in programmes to ensure effective collaboration. Sectors such as soil and water conservation, afforestation and pasture development, water resource development, and activities such as animal husbandry, horticulture, floriculture, and fisheries are targeted for building collaboration between relevant departments and the three-tier Panchayati Raj system.[4]

The analysis of policy documents shows the primary emphasis for building effective collaboration has been on a) activity mapping of the various stakeholders, and b) organising group meetings.

4.   Mapping of Activities: Existing Mechanism and Problems

A detailed analysis was undertaken from activity mapping of internal Government Orders (GO) of the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development (P&RD), Government of West Bengal (GoWB) (P&RD, Government Order 2005, P&RD, GoWB 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). The analysis shows two major initiatives: a) attachment of the line department

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[3] GoI (2010) Annual Plan 2010-11; Planning Commission, Government of India: New Delhi
[4] <http://planning.up.nic.in/annualplan0405/part2/Chapter-02.htm>, retrieved 18th April 2009.

officials to three tiers of the Panchayati Raj institution through different standing committees, and b) the roles to be played by the different lines of command (P&RD, GoWB 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). The activity mapping of the line departments and standing committees shows the following categories of activities:

1. Selection of beneficiaries for various government schemes
2. Capacity-building activities
3. Input distribution
4. Assistance – mostly financial
5. Sensitisation and awareness raising activities
6. Budget estimation
7. Building and/or maintaining infrastructure
8. Co-ordination of activities of the tiers
9. Monitoring (P&RD, Government Order 2005).

The activity pattern falls broadly into four categories: a) information collection, b) input distribution, c) awareness generation, and d) fiscal management (*Ibid*). Analysis of patterns of work of different standing committees indicates two inherent problems with the present structure:

1. *The top down problem:* the beneficiary selection process is largely top-down. A government order from the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development in 2005 indicates that officials and standing committee members decide the numbers (of schemes, for example) where local demands are often not reflected. Subsequent initiatives on financial assistance or training inputs are based on this initial selection, and as a result the entire system follows a top-down flow of decisions.

2. *Incomplete collaboration:* P&RD, GO (2005), P&RD (2009) show that the work pattern provides limited scope for collaboration and information flow between the Panchayat tiers because of a) the top-down flow of decisions, and b) that work programmes and targets are set *a priori*.

In addition, the system is heavily dependent on standing committee meetings and monthly meetings for a collaborated and integrated approach. The analysis of annual reports as well as gazetteers shows that no formal stipulation is made for effective collaboration between local government and line departments.

5.   Issues of Co-ordination

With the Government of West Bengal's commencement of provisions of the 73rd amendment, the Panchayati Raj institution is expected to be formally strengthened with the process of participatory and decentralised planning. The initiative was mostly related to planning and fiscal issues. The Government of West Bengal's administrative report of 2002 – 2003 (P&RDa), says that "government has decided to ... make the services of the Line Department officials at the district level available to the respective tiers of the local self-government institutions."[5] It was thought the initiative that formally integrates the District Magistrate Zila Parishad offices[6] would lead to a strong link between other government departments with Panchayat system. The formation of ten standing committees with a "balanced mix of elected representatives and appointed officials concerned with the related programmes" was projected as a sound mechanism for effective collaboration.[7]

On 27th September 2005, fifteen line departments were devolved to Panchayats, which were expected to discuss their initiatives in Panchayat standing committee meetings before taking decisions. Different reports show the system depends heavily on the standing committee meetings, but field data shows that these meetings are often not held or not attended by line department officials. The activity-mapping shows that line department officials are expected to consult standing committees, but it is not mandatory. Apart from these occasional meetings, no mention is made about the process of collaboration between the line departments and the Panchayati Raj system. The administrative reports show the lack of endeavour by the officials, though "in respect of planned development in *most of the cases* (emphasis added) decisions are taken by the line departments after discussing the same in the meeting of the standing committee concerned[8]" and "it is always desirable to have formal

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[5] P&RD. Annual Administrative Report 2002 – 2003
[6] Ibid, p. 15
[7] Ibid, p. 18
[8] P&RD. Annual Administrative Report 2006 – 2007, p. 21-2.

orders or support of legal framework for defining the responsibilities of the Panchayats as well as delineating inter-tier responsibilities."[9] An awareness of this 'taken-for-grantedness' is shown in these reports, which draw to the attention of the relevant departments the need for formalizing the responsibilities of the Panchayats.

The Kolkata Gazette shows the same casual mindset towards issues of co-ordination:

> there shall be proper coordination between Panchayat Samiti [local government at the Block level], its Sthayee Samitis [the standing committees] and block level officers of line departments of the State Government in all matters relating to planning, execution and administration of development work and the sabhapati, sahakari sabhapati, [head and assistant-head of the Block] of the Block, executive officer and other functionaries, officers and employees shall endeavour to maintain, and also desist from disrupting, such coordination so as to ensure unhindered progress of development programme.[10]

However, the ways to 'endeavour for coordination' or 'desist from the disruption' remain unexplained. The gazette talks about the possible 'mismatch'[11] of initiatives taken by line departments and Panchayat, but there is no mention about the ways to avoid this mismatch. It is presumed that the standing committee meetings will mitigate these issues.

The system is backed by differential fund disbursement.. Panchayats do not have an exclusive functional domain, as line departments continue to be funded to carry out development functions where mandates for discussion with elected representatives are not monitored properly.

The initiative for decentralisation with the enhancement of Panchayat's decision-making capacity lacks the impetus for integrating line departments within the formal Panchayat system. There are structural problems which suggest the limited nature of the line department's integration into the system.

However, it is important to address the following question: Why do the line department officials remain reluctant to attend the meetings? Is it solely because of role confusion and

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[9] Ibid, p. 22
[10] P&RD. Extraordinary. (2008), p. 12
[11] Ibid, p. 3.

absence of strict mandates? Or has it something to do with the present organisational structure? To address the question, an analytical study of the organisational structure of the Panchayat system was undertaken. Figure 1 shows the organisational structure of the Panchayat system currently in operation.

The organisational structure shows that although line departments are linked to the three tiers of the Panchayat system, they are not accountable to elected representatives or to executives. Therefore, unification of the line departments with the three tiers has been incomplete. As a result, the structure has created power and role confusion as well as the lack of accountability. Although there are many standing committees, their mandates are overlooked as they cannot oblige the government officials who are accountable to their department headquarters.

Outcome of the 'taken-for-grantedness'

Field interactions with officials from different tiers (12 Block Development Officers [BDO] the Chief Civil Servant at the Block Level), twenty-four Gram (Village/ Local) Panchayat Pradhans (Heads) and Secretaries indicate a lack of clarity in the roles between the different tiers and also within the line departments. The situation leads to poor use of manpower as the Panchayat and the line departments are assigned with similar tasks with blurred role definition. From the field experience it appears that role-confusion and lack of clarity are outcomes of the 'taken-for-granted' attitude of the line departments. Fifteen line department officials interviewed argue that their presence in the meeting is not mandatory, and often fail to attend meetings due to other preoccupations. With this preliminary understanding, we try to address the consequences of the lack of clarity in roles.

Lack of coordination at planning level

Each BDO accepts that annual plans prepared by the District Council, other tiers of the Panchayat, and line departments are not well integrated. The communication between Panchayat and line departments is restricted to the top-level officials, which creates a lack of integration at the start of the planning process which ideally should be bottom-up.
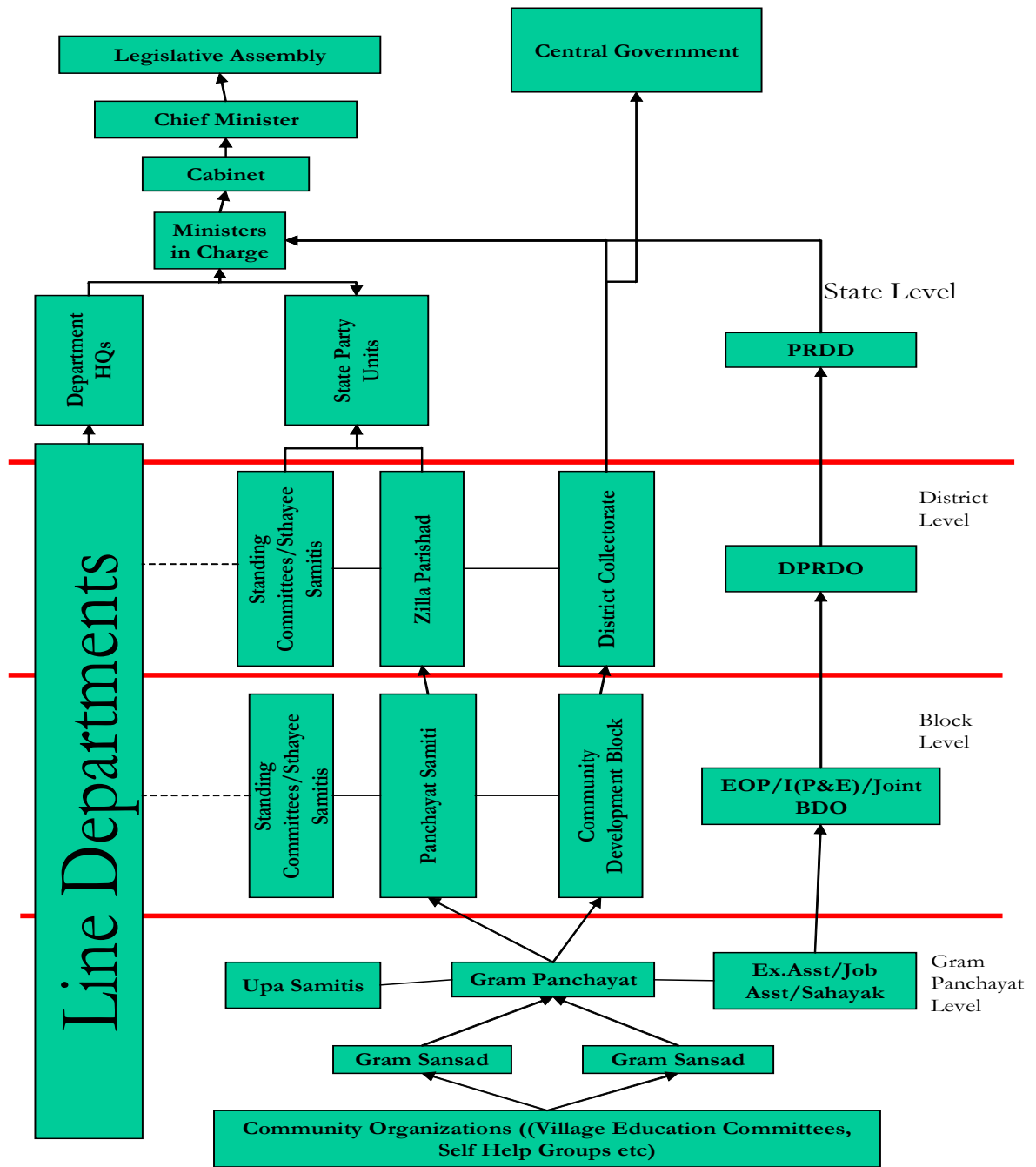
Figure 1. Organisational structure of different levels of officials of the Panchayat system. (Ref. P&RD, Unpublished, *Organisational Issues for Strengthening Rural Decentralisation in West Bengal PRI Review*)

Lack of information-flow between line department(s) and Standing Committees

From the analysis of policy documents and Annual Administrative Reports, it appears that the government is hopeful about the success of standing committee meetings and monthly meetings with executives. However, in reality, line department officials are reluctant to share information with standing committees, and lack interest in participating in the standing committee meetings. Each BDO reports that not all line department officials care to attend monthly meetings. Moreover, since these officials are accountable only to their respective departments, BDOs cannot take any disciplinary action against them.

Lack of effective utilisation of resources

Line department officials commonly plead insufficient staff to carry out effective planning, proper needs assessments and feasibility estimates. Better coordination can mitigate issues of understaffing through better use of resources and less overlap of initiatives. Policy problems also concede unintended power to bureaucrats and technocrats of the line departments. Inequality of power and role-confusion have created a situation where "there is no planning by Panchayat tiers and implementation has been reduced to a nexus between the contractors, the elected representatives and line department officials."[12] As a consequence, instead of evolving as institutions of self-governance, the role of Panchayats is reduced, as people outside the line departments suffer from absence of skills, which impedes grassroots democracy; "the Sarpanch (Pradhan) and the Panchayat secretary along with the officials of the line departments continue to rule Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and people simply do not have any other option but to depend on their decisions … also, there is a tendency of PRIs, especially the Gram Panchayats, to perceive themselves as government contractors rather than as change agents."[13]

This partial administrative decentralisation means that the role of local officials is largely confined to implementation of development programmes, and elected representatives have minimal influence over local development priorities and exercise limited oversight over line department officials (Mathew and Jain 2005) as "essential services ... continue to be the preserve of line departments which operate in a top down manner and which have not been

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[12] Mathew and Jain (2005), p. 73
[13] Action for Social Advancement (2005), p. 2.

made subject to effective accountability mechanisms with regards to the elected government."[14]

6.   Narratives of Domination

Members of different standing committees as well as BDOs frequently cite instances of domination by the line departments. They identify lack of role-clarity and problem of accountability as prime reasons. However, there are instances of "good officials" too, who because of their good "human qualities" were "kind enough" to listen and care for the collaborative effort to the development.

> We have no power to compel them (Line Department Officials) to do things that we need. In fact if they do not follow the Annual Action Plan, we cannot do anything. They have separate plans and most of the time they work accordingly… their control lies with their departments not with me. Even if an official misses monthly meetings regularly, I cannot even ask them not to do so. I have no formal control (Voice of a BDO Recorded on January 13, 2009)

The helplessness is well reflected when the BDO says "*their control lies with their departments not with me.*"

Although elected representatives and heads of different standing committees try to convince line department officials to recognise local needs, they frequently remain unheard.

> There is a separate allowance of Rs. 750/- for the cleaning of water reservoirs. We have tried to convince the PHE department to perform regular cleaning operations … they did not care for our requests … they are government employees. Since I am the karmadhakshya [head of the standing committee] … if something happens with water contamination, people will blame us… but in reality… I have no power … (Voice of head of the standing committee at the District, recorded on January 19, 2009)

It seems that the elected representatives have no formal line of command over the decisions of the line departments as they cannot take any formal steps.

A similar allegation was made by the head of Agriculture, Irrigation and Cooperative Standing Committee of one district:

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[14] P&RD, Unpublished, *Organisational Issues for Strengthening Rural Decentralisation in West Bengal PRI Review*.

> Line department staff do not work in the Blocks … there are six defunct deep
> tubewells in Nowda Block … I personally requested the irrigation department official,
> but they have refused to work … Now I have heard they are demanding money from
> the poor villagers … (Recorded on December 21, 2008)

The present mechanism has created space for the line department officials to dominate. Lack of accountability to the local administrative and political cadres hinders proper monitoring and evaluation. As reported by elected representatives and BDOs, this monopoly of line department officials not only creates problems of coordination but also promotes corruption, as there is no local monitoring and evaluation system in operation.

7.   Conclusions

West Bengal is a well administered state, and a state in which governments have been *enthusiastic* about decentralisation since 1977. Most less developed countries are less well-administered than West Bengal, and many governments are less enthusiastic about decentralising. This study is therefore important, because the problems of West Bengal may be more acute in other parts of India and the developing world. Furthermore, coordination with line departments has had little attention in the literature on decentralisation. The conclusion, therefore, draws together practical recommendations identified through the project.

Inter-governmental coordination helps in providing effective use of scarce resources. In the present paper, we show that Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal is severely affected by lack of coordination between line departments and three-tier local government because of the absence of role-clarity and mandates, and faulty organisation design. The Panchayati Raj governance system is complex and multilayered. Without a clear mandate for effective collaboration, role-confusion and power struggles among officials and elected members are notable. The standing committees are intended to integrate line departments and the Panchayati system, but it lacks appropriate strategies. The provision for monthly meetings between members and line department officials shows the intention of coordination, but any monitoring of such meetings depends heavily on people's self-interest in problem-solving. There is an urgent need to devise and reorder the entire system to redefine the hierarchy and respective roles, and to formulate a detailed strategy to enhance collaboration. To tackle this task, a fuller study of issues mentioned by scholars across disciplines is needed, but steps can

be taken to combat the immediate problems of lack of co-ordination and accountability of line departments. Mathew and Jain (2005) suggest empowering the standing committees by making them "responsible for approval before, during and after the execution of works." In addition, a thorough study of the practical solutions as provided by scholars such as Goss (2001) and Gendenhuys (2008) may be useful. Below is a list of practical measures designed by the authors, which is an outcome of the theoretical and field-level understanding of the issue. The first four recommendations are general, and the last eight deal with practical solutions for the Panchayati Raj Institutions of West Bengal in the light of recommendations by Goss and Geldenhuys.

1. Role-players should clearly identify the objectives of cross-boundary working. This would mean a shared understanding of what networks are for, and a greater degree of information exchange between different stakeholders.

2. The agenda of inter-governmental networking should be continuously refreshed and researched, and continuous reform should be practised by involving all stakeholders.

3. The loose ends in inter-governmental coordination should be identified and tied down through adherence to strict regulations.

4. There should be clearly defined roles, expectations and responsibilities for all stakeholders.

5. Empowerment of the PRI institutions should be accompanied by making line departments accountable to the three tiers of the Panchayat system.

6. The reporting practices should include the standing committees, so that the committees can monitor the progress of the initiatives taken by the various line departments.

7. Different stakeholders including elected representatives, executives, officials and line department staff should be merged with the different standing committees.

8. Salaries of line department officials should be controlled by the Block Development Officer. Different offices, including Gram Panchayats should be given powers to certify line department officials at the time of their retirement.

9. There should be an internal evaluation system of line department officials attached to different standing committees.

10. The Village Panchayat should play an active role the in the assessment of work through the social audit process.

11. Plans prepared by the Village Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis (at the Block level), Zila Parishads (at the District level), line departments and the District Planning Committee should be coordinated through regular meetings. The District Planning Committee can act focus for co-ordination. If necessary, special planners should be appointed at all three levels.

12. Devolution of funds will allow Panchayats to implement schemes to be planned and designed through Gram Sabhas and Village Panchayats that will be subsequently consolidated with plans prepared by Intermediate Panchayats and District Panchayats through the District Planning Committee. Line departments should actively involve themselves in the total process which would be monitored by the Block Development Officer at the Block level and coordinated by the District Planning Committee.

Operational actions and interactions determine effective interdepartmental coordination in the local government. In the Indian context, especially in West Bengal, the most comprehensive challenge lies at the operational level as the system lacks a proper regulatory mechanism. It is reasonable to emphasise two things: designing the inter-organisational collaboration is an interactive process and demands attention to structural, procedural and cognitive aspects of the organisations; and without careful design of the 'rules of the game' for interdepartmental coordination, the networking remains inefficient and triggers numerous problems in practice, which undermines the real essence of democracy.

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