

# Democratic Decentralization and Empowerment of Local Government Associations in Kerala

---

Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance  
Issue 2: January 2009  
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/cjlg>

**N. Ramakantan**

Kerala Institute of Local Administration, India



## 1. Introduction

During the past decade the Indian state of Kerala has been successfully carrying out democratic decentralization, and has substantially transformed the functions of local governments in line with the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts, which institutionalised the local government system in India. In particular, formulation and implementation of micro plans with community participation has produced remarkable changes in the dynamics of local development and in the public management of local governments. This initiative for participatory planning at the local level taken by the government of Kerala enormously empowered local communities and the different actors in the local political system.

In promoting democratic decentralization, Kerala adopted a 'Big Bang' approach. The government launched a 'People's Planning Campaign' and undertook massive capacity building efforts to empower local governments. It also devolved massive financial resources to local governments to exercise the powers and responsibilities vested in them by the Constitutional Act and the State laws. Associations of local governments were placed at the centre of this strategy and became part of an institutional framework for regular consultation on policy issues related to decentralization and local governance.

From 1996 to 2001 these capacity building activities were carried out by the 'Campaign Cell' of the State Planning Board. Since then responsibility has been transferred to the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), and today KILA is recognized as the nodal institution for capacity building of local governments and their associations in Kerala. The sustainability of democratic decentralization is seen to rest in large part on building the capacity, continuous support and ownership of the associations of local governments.

## 2. 'Big Bang' Approach

Typically, it would be argued that capacity building is the precondition for any successful decentralization. Traditional wisdom calls for firstly, capacity building of local governments, and then giving power to them by degrees as their capacity improves. In Kerala, this theoretical sequence of decentralization was reversed. Instead of waiting while the capacity of elected representatives and officials of local governments and their associations was enhanced, the government took the revolutionary decision to devolve 35 to 40 percent of the Ninth Five Year Plan outlay to local governments at the same time as building capacity. This transfer of responsibilities and funds to local governments generated considerable pressure on the state government from various quarters to build competence, and to ensure that new responsibilities are carried out effectively and funds properly utilized. Thus to operationalise decentralization it was decided that capacity building had to coincide with formulation of local plans and a strategy of 'learning while doing' was applied to the local planning process.

A distinctive feature of the decentralization experiment in Kerala was the central role allotted to developing capacity in participatory planning and empowerment of associations of local governments in policy advocacy. The task of formulating and implementing local plans was quite new to local governments and their associations, and they had never experimented with such a responsibility. Thus capacity building focused on local plans based on local choices and preferences, and supporting people-centered development processes at the local level.

Apart from the comprehensive nature of the local plans and the maximum autonomy given to local governments in their plan formulation, the micro-level planning methodology adopted in Kerala is distinguished from similar experiments in other states by an insistence of mass participation and transparency. Capacity building was designed to promote empowerment and social mobilization of the people for social and economic transformation. It was realized that capacity building initiatives on a massive scale were essential for any people-centered development process. Capacity building for democratic decentralization is seen as a long term investment in people and their organizations. It was also realized that building social capital and an enlightened citizenry would be useful for fostering strong and effective institutions of local governments and promoting deliberative democracy.

Therefore attempts have been made to ensure the participation of mass organizations and associations of local governments along with elected representatives and officials in capacity building programs. These programs covered tens of thousands of elected representatives, officials, experts and representatives of numerous mass organizations. It became a massive awareness building activity for the ordinary people as well as competence building for elected representatives and the leaders of associations of local governments.

Another aspect of capacity building in Kerala is its focus on marginalized social groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women, to reduce the gap with the rest of the society. Concerted efforts have been made to empower and mainstream these groups through capacity building. Emphasis has been given to empowering them to take actions and decisions in governance.

### **3. Leadership by the Campaign Cell and Associations of Local Governments**

The Campaign Cell of the State Planning Board and associations of local governments were involved in all aspects of the training cycle, right from designing the training policy to assessment of the training for local government functionaries. The Campaign Cell sought the support of experts in different subject areas and training methodologies and made use of all available resources in the state for this purpose. It also opened up new and exciting arenas in local governance and development and innovated diverse new methodologies for training delivery on a massive scale. Training programmes were designed in tune with different phases of local plan formulation and to suit the training needs of local governments to carry out particular planning tasks. The Campaign Cell undertook regular consultation with leaders of local government associations regarding the practical and operational training needs of different local government functionaries, and ensured that methods of delivery were suited to the different needs of officials, elected representatives and representatives of voluntary organizations. District Training Advisory Councils were formed with the active involvement of leaders of associations of local governments to steer programme implementation.

### **4. Capacity Building to Empower Local Governments and their Associations**

The democratic decentralization process in Kerala realized the complexities involved in political decentralization and restructuring of powers in favour of local governments. One of the most important assumptions of democratic decentralization was that empowerment of local governments would lead to fostering political decentralization and broadening the mass base of local governments, accelerating the process of democratisation. However, there was an evident lack of capacity on the part of elected representatives to materialize the objectives of the Constitution Acts, 1992 (73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments), and to realize the meaning of self-governance. Experience suggested that the Panchayati

Raj<sup>1</sup> and municipalities had so far worked as bureaucratically controlled, state funded delivery arms of government with only a semblance of local democracy. The elected representatives had no real control in the decision making process and in its implementation. The greatest challenge before democratic decentralization was, therefore, to build the required level of capacity among the elected representatives to carry forward the process of political decentralization and to exercise the powers mandated by the Constitution and state laws.

Capacity building is the key to transforming local governments in this direction. Attempts were made to generate a clear understanding of the importance of training and the value of people's participation. Local governments and their associations realized that coping with the rapid political and social transformation generated by decentralization also requires a great deal of administrative competence. Hence, local governments and their associations responded positively to the capacity building programmes, and have shown high degree of motivation and enthusiasm in the learning process.

### **5. Training Strategy**

Capacity building for democratic decentralization was to move away from traditional forms of training and development. The approach taken was a practical one to equip the different functionaries and resource persons quickly and effectively to formulate local plans through a democratic and participatory process. Increased involvement of learners was ensured through a 'learning by doing' approach. Learners were given every opportunity to give their feedback and transfer the learning into their real work situations.

The strategy was as follows:

- Leadership by the Campaign Cell and associations of local governments in all aspects of the training cycle
- A modular training structure with well defined objectives and a clear plan of action
- A more focused and needs-based approach to training design and implementation
- Regular and ongoing monitoring and assessment of learning and transfer of learning
- Periodic updating of the capacity of trainers and regular interaction with policy support groups like associations of local governments
- Efforts for reinforcement and follow up of learning.

A cascading training-of-trainers strategy was applied. Resource persons were identified at all levels. The 800 Key Resource Persons who attended state level training programmes trained 10,000 District Resource Persons who in turn trained more than 100,000 Local Resource Persons during different phases of the Peoples'

---

<sup>1</sup> Rural local governments at village and district levels.

Planning Campaign. The success of democratic decentralization was largely due to the selection of appropriate persons with proven credentials as trainers and resource persons, and the support extended by associations of local governments.

Democratic decentralization and the capacity building efforts also focused on creating a responsive system of administration at the local level and making departmental officials accountable to the elected representatives.

There is no parallel for the training programmes organized as apart of the capacity building process of decentralization in Kerala in terms of its scale: the number of participants, extent of coverage and diversity of topics that were covered within a stipulated time frame. The number of participants who attended at different levels of training programmes during the six phases of People's Planning Campaign are given below.

Phase	State Level	District Level	Block Level	Panchayat/ Municipal Level
I	375(5)	11,716(3)		100,000 (1)
II	660(3)	11,808(2)		100,000 (1)
III	300(4)	1,146(3)	150,000(2)	
IV	3,014(3)		10,000(2)	
V	1,186(3)			
	304(2)			
VI	150(2)	6,000(2)		
	300(3)		6,000(1)	
VII	2,890(2)		6,000(1)	
	3,360(2)		25,000(2)	

Numbers in parentheses represent days of training. Figures do not include one day conferences like state level conferences of Presidents and Chairpersons, consultation meetings etc.

Source: Economic Review: 2000, State Planning Board, Government of Kerala

Target groups for training programmes included the following categories:

- Elected representatives of local governments
- Ministerial staff
- Officers of transferred institutions
- Voluntary experts of different organizations
- Members of expert committees
- Experts from different scientific and academic institutions.

The composition and coverage of target group(s) varied in different phases of the training based on the objectives and the agenda of the Peoples' Planning Campaign, as did the design, content and coverage of the training programmes themselves. Core subject areas of training programmes consisted of:

### ***Democratic Decentralization and Participatory Planning***

- Changing paradigm of development planning
- Concept and importance of decentralised planning
- Basic principles and methodology of local planning
- Peoples' participation and democratic decentralization
- Role of Grama Sabha<sup>2</sup> in local governance
- Gender in development
- Development of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
- Panchayati Raj and its Constitutional mandate
- Preparation of the Development Report
- Formulation of development plans and projects
- Appraisal and vetting of plans
- Implementation and monitoring of plans.

### ***Local Governance and Financial Management***

- Panchayati Raj Act and Municipal Act
- Powers and responsibilities of local governments in the changing context
- Roles and responsibilities of the President, Secretary and committees
- Conduct of meetings
- Preparation of budget and integration of budget and plan
- Utilization of funds and accounts keeping
- Store purchase rules
- Public works management.

## **6. Institutionalising the Capacity Building Process**

The establishment of a systematic ongoing approach to capacity development and training is the key to making the decentralization process sustainable and transforming local governments into more accountable, democratic, transparent and responsive institutions. Therefore since completing the initial task of formulating and implementing local plans and achieving the requisite competency in participatory planning, attempts have been made by the State Planning Board to institutionalise the capacity building process. A project known as Capacity Development of Decentralization in Kerala (CapDecK) was launched with the support of Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). In this phase the SPB collaborated with a number of local learning and academic institutions to conduct further training:

- Kerala Institute of Local Administration
- State Institute of Rural Development
- Institute of Management in Government
- Kerala Agriculture University
- Medical Colleges
- State Council of Education Research and Training
- Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development
- Integrated Rural Technology Centre

---

<sup>2</sup> Village meetings open to all adults over 18 years of age.

- Centre for the Development of Imaging Technology.

Nearly 30,000 participants attended training courses offered by these institutions during 1999-2000.

Subsequently the Committee on Decentralization of Powers recommended that the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) be designated as the lead institution for capacity building of local governments. In order to fulfil this task, KILA has been involved in designing and implementing a large number of training programmes with the objective of strengthening local governments and empowering community level organizations. The focus is on assisting local governments to strengthen their internal systems in tune with the spirit of decentralization. Core subject areas of capacity building by KILA are therefore:

- Good local governance
- Empowerment of standing committees
- Natural resource management
- Project management
- Gender mainstreaming and women empowerment
- Development of marginalized social groups
- Public works management
- Financial management and accounting systems.

Details of training programmes organised by KILA during the institutionalisation phase of decentralization are given in the table below.

Year	Programmes	Participants
1999-2000	103	7,623
2000-01	75	8,607
2001-02	83	10,256
2002-03	58	4,200
2003-04	245	64,160
2004-05	249	29,009
Total	813	123,855

## 7. Fresh Approach and New Strategy for Capacity Building

The capacity building efforts carried out as part of democratic decentralization have produced a transformation in the functioning of local governments in Kerala. Local governments are now capable of formulating and implementing local plans and are competent enough to carry forward the political decentralization process in the right direction. Key results of capacity building include:

- The development of the desired level of capacity on the part of elected representatives to exercise political powers vested with them and to take part in the decision making process

- Improved performance of local governments in exercising the powers mandated with them by the Constitutional Amendment Acts
- Increased level of competence of the staff and officials of local governments and of institutions transferred to local governments to provide better delivery of services to the people
- Increased capacity on the part of civil society organizations and enrichment of social capital to facilitate effective public management
- Enlightenment of citizens to take part in the public management of local governments and to participate effectively in the decision making process at the local level
- Improved level of performance in accountability, transparency, democratisation and responsiveness of local governments, and in responding positively to local needs and demands.

However, a fresh look into capacity building efforts for local government is now needed in light of the experience of the last decade. Many local governments are still unable to make full use of the powers vested in them. An ongoing capacity building process should be designed and implemented on the basis of following principles:

- Training to be organised in sufficient quantity and quality within the stipulated time frame
- Better coordination, integration and networking of training organizations within the state
- Effective collaboration and policy dialogue between associations of local governments and training organizations
- Greater ownership of local governments and their associations in the capacity building process
- Training-supportive studies and research for policy advocacy and transforming local governments.

Training will have to be learner-centred and new methods of training delivery will be required. The strategy should involve development of the capacity of training professionals, increased involvement of learners in their own learning process, development of a modular structure of training, and a more focused approach to training evaluation.

Training will also need to keep pace with changing needs. Elections are held every five years. Changes in elected representatives also result from the rotation system of seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and women. This will create a demand for continuous capacity building of elected representatives. Periodic reinforcement of capacity building is also needed for the effective performance of local government functionaries. Capacity building cannot be a one-time affair, it will be continuous and regular efforts should be made to build competence according to needs.



At the same time steps have to be taken to measure performance after training events to see what level of improvement has taken place. Measuring performance in this way is also important to ensure effectiveness in using training resources and to make capacity building efforts sustainable. Generally, very few attempts have been made to collect data on performance in the workplace after the training. It is of utmost importance to conduct training-related studies to assess the validity, currency, authenticity and sufficiency of training.

Alongside training there is a need for a common platform for stakeholders in decentralization to come together and discuss the day-to-day affairs of local governance and policy issues related to decentralization. The associations of local governments should provide the lead to establish these platforms at both state and district levels. Activities would include:

- Experience-sharing and networking of local government functionaries
- Policy advocacy for strengthening decentralization and good governance
- Documentation of innovative practices in local governance and their dissemination
- Promoting capacity building of different functionaries of local governments
- Promoting research and studies on local level development issues
- Strengthening associations of local governments and their capacity to deepen decentralization and grass-roots democracy.

## References

- CSES [Centre for Socio-Economic and Environment Studies], CRM [Centre for Rural Management] and SDC-CapDecK, 2003. *Emerging Issues in Panchayati Raj in Kerala*, SDC-CapDecK, Thiruvananthapuram.
- KILA [Kerala Institute of Local Administration], 2003. *Local Governments in Kerala: Reforms, Decentralised Development and Local Government Finances*, Trissur.
- KILA [Kerala Institute of Local Administration], 2004. *Platforms for Strengthening Democratic Decentralization and Local Governance: Approach Paper*, Trissur.
- Serban, D. 2002. *A Practical Guide for Local Government Training in Central and Eastern Europe*, Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative, Budapest.
- Sreedharan, E.M., Prasad, M.K. and V.G. Manamohan (eds), 2000. *Janakeeyasoothranam Oru Vilayiruthal* (Malayalam), State Planning Board, Trivandrum.
- Thomas, I. and W.R. Frnake, 2000. *Local Democracy and Development: People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning in Kerala*, Leftword, New Delhi.