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Experiences in *Panchayat*-based planning in the mountains of Himachal Pradesh, India

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Background to Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh (HP) is a rural mountainous State of India, lying in the western Himalayas. With two-thirds under forest management¹, only 10.5% is devoted to crop production. But 67% of the owners have a plot size of less than 0.4ha and thus non-farm resources are important in people's livelihoods. The increasing population is further fragmenting the hilly terraced croplands. Socially, the mountain communities are composed of people from different caste backgrounds, involving a complex social hierarchy of castes, connoting a differential status, with the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) being accorded the lowest status in practice although constitutionally, all citizens of India enjoy an equal status.

The mountain areas are both inaccessible and fragile, leading to restricted opportunities for growth as well as hidden poverty. Welfare investments through grants from Central Government and loans from financial institutions made some impacts from 1960s to 1980s. But with the shrinkage of Central Government funding and the poor revenues generated, the state of HP is now facing a financial crisis. In this context, there is a real need for an effective,

local methodology for identifying and funding community priorities and reducing wastage. This article documents the trials undertaken in this direction, the approaches used, and their impacts.

Structures of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions in HP

The state of HP embraced the key elements of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment², leading to the 1994 HP *Panchayati Raj* Act, which strengthens the devolutionary process through the following *Panchayati Raj* Institution (PRI) structures as shown in Table 1.

In HP, the *Panchayati Raj* and Rural Development Department (PRRDD) is the department responsible for PRIs and caters for training, administrative, and support needs of the about 3037 *Gram Panchayats*, 75 *Panchayat Samitis*, and 12 *Zila Parishads* with about 26,532 elected office bearers working within them. All PRI bodies are elected on a non-party basis for a five-year term and include the mandatory reservation of seats for some sections of society with a traditionally lower social status to ensure equity in political opportunity. One third of all seats, including those of Chairs of the different tiers, are reserved for women. For the SCs and STs,

¹ Of the 67% forest, almost 29% is for grazing and pastures. A third of forest lands have not yet been demarcated through surveys and settlements.

² After almost five years of debate and the introduction of Bills by successive governments in Parliament, the PRIs were accepted with the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution providing them with the basis on which to act as statutory bodies for local self-governance.

Table 1: Structures of Panchayati Raj Institutions in HP

Level	Constitution	Role
The Zila Parishad	Constituted for each District, they consist of directly elected members representing a group of <i>Panchayats</i> with a population of 20,000. Elected members elect from within themselves an executive committee. National parliament members are also <i>Zila Parishad</i> members.	Plans and implements economic development and social justice schemes. Financed by Central and State governments. Controls, coordinates, and guides the <i>Panchayat Samitis</i> & <i>Gram Panchayats</i> .
The Panchayat Samiti	Constituted for each development block and consisting of a directly elected member representing a <i>Gram Panchayat(s)</i> with a population of about 3,000. Elected members elect from within themselves the executive committee. Members of national parliament, whose constituency falls in that block, are also members. One fifth of <i>Gram Panchayat</i> presidents are members by rotation.	Plans and implements developmental projects and schemes based on specified roles and functions and subject to funds received from state and central government. Also acts as a coordination body between the <i>Gram Panchayats</i> and the block level departments.
Gram Panchayat	Executive of the <i>Gram Sabha</i> . It consists of ward members elected by each <i>Up Gram Sabha</i> and a directly elected <i>Panchayat</i> president. Each <i>Panchayat</i> has at least one trained secretary/assistant paid by the PRRDD.	Meeting twice a month, it is responsible for 29 civic functions e.g. maintenance of village roads, public wells, culverts, sanitation etc. Prepares and implements schemes for economic development and social justice. Receives grants from State and Central Government.
Gram Sabhas and Up Gram Sabhas	A village or a group of villages with a population of 1,000–5,000 (an average of 1,200–1,800 in practice). Each <i>Gram Sabha</i> is further subdivided into 5–13 <i>Up Gram Sabha</i> (wards), where the communities can meet and participate more easily and effectively.	Working as the common platform for all voters, the <i>Sabhas</i> provide the foundation for direct democratic control and accountability by the communities over their elected PRI representatives. Each <i>Gram Sabha</i> meets four times a year, while the <i>Up Gram Sabhas</i> hold their meetings twice a year.

seat reservation is in proportion to their population.

Line departments suffer from a narrow approach to development that has discouraged partnership and participation by the communities. Historical experiences from all over India show that **people-based planning** is an effective mechanism for strengthening local self-governance, as it entails the implementation of activities as directed by a People's Plan, in the form of a *Panchayat* Micro Plan (PMP).

History and background to PMP

Panchayat Micro Planning (PMP) came into HP in 1996, with the first trials conducted by the NGO Rural Technology and Development Centre³(RTDC). Subsequently, many other organisations piloted PMP processes. State-level workshops were held to promote experience sharing and strengthen PMP processes. Due to this advocacy, in 1999 the Government emphasised the promotion of PMPs, adding a further legitimacy and fresh impetus.

The Indo-German Changar Eco-Development Project (IGCEDP)⁴, a bilateral project between the governments of Germany and HP, and implemented by GTZ and the Forest Department, had simultaneously built up a village-level planning approach called Integrated Resource Management Planning (IRMP). Recognising the importance of mainstreaming natural resource-based development planning, IGCEDP initiated trials in eight *Panchayats* (45 villages). The result was the evolution of IRMPs into a methodology for villagers to make *Panchayat*-level PMPs.

The impact of these was limited as they were implemented in a project mode. RTDC, whose core staff had been working with IGCEDP, decided to initiate community block-level trials in direct collaboration with the PRRDD, involving staff from the line departments at the block. Finally, the Government agreed to and initiated the Bhatia pilot PMP block trials in Chamba District in 2003, one of the poorest districts of the country.

³ Contact: Sh. Sukhdev Vishwapremi, Co-ordinator, at rtdc@glide.net.in or more information on www.navrachna.org

⁴ Contact: Dr. Rajan Kotru, current Team Leader GTZ-PSU, at rkotru@gtzindia.com

Volunteers of one of the seven ward planning teams of the Panchayat learning how to read their ward map using a standard 1:1000 cadastral map traced from the revenue records.



Photo: Rajeev Ahal

The objective was to:

- develop a **team** that could take the planning process forward for implementing the PMP, and expand it in phases into neighbouring *Panchayats* and the whole block;
- develop a model that can later be **replicated** by PRRDD in the whole state;
- involve **line departments** (such as agriculture, horticulture, irrigation, forests etc.) in the preparation and implementation of PMPs;
- **promote convergence** between watershed committees⁵ and the *Panchayats* using PMPs as a common plan;
- part-finance PMPs through funds already available (untied funds, watershed funds, and some lapsing tied funds at the block and district levels); and,
- enhance **local livelihoods** based on natural resources and existing livelihood skills identified through PMPs.

The process has now been demonstrated in six *Panchayats* and is currently underway in 11 more. In each *Panchayat*, a minimum of 30–45 volunteers from the local villages learn and conduct the process without payment of any kind.

PMP methodology and approach

The process is initiated through one trained facilitator for each *Panchayat* using a detailed methodology manual and two planning workbooks, one for *Up Gram Sabha* (village) planning and one for integrating them all into the *Panchayat* plan. All these are in the local language.

⁵ The Central Government in India provides direct support to watershed projects in degraded districts. Funds are routed through the deputy commissioners at district level, with BDOs as project implementing agencies. Watershed committees play the role of executing the works, but they are often formed by politically-motivated individuals and act as parallel institutions to PRIs, especially the *Panchayats*. Sixteen of the Bhatia block's 64 *Panchayats* have watershed projects.

Initiation and organisation formation

Poor communications and the limited capacity of CBOs undermine participation and allow vested interest groups to take control of any new initiatives. PMP volunteers worked to form community groups and provide information about the PMP process (objectives, methodology, roles, and benefits) through *Up Gram Sabha* meetings. A *Gram Sabha* meeting was then held to seek public endorsement for the initiation of the PMP process in each *Panchayat*. The involvement of the block and district administration was ensured.

Ward-level participatory data collection

Each *Up Gram Sabha* met and nominated a team of volunteers called the ward planning team (WPTs), which included semi-literate men and women (one third of the team). They were introduced to the *cadastral* maps⁶ of their wards and taught how to mark the households, hamlets, infrastructure, and physical features (roads, rivers, gulleys, temples, spring wells etc.). The WPTs went back to their wards and completed the forms and the maps at village meetings. The listing of existing infrastructure (buildings, roads, wells etc.) and their preference ranking for services provided by the different line departments were ascertained by WPTs using participatory tools.

In a second training session, the WPTs learnt to identify the different land uses and mark them on the *cadastral* map, as well as how to catalogue basic information about their ownership (including both individuals and communities), size, and status, leading to the identification of problems and potentials. Watershed boundaries and drainage lines were identified and marked on the maps by the WPTs, each working simultaneously in the seven to thirteen wards making up each *Panchayat* (each ward consists of five to eight villages on average).

Ward-level data interpretation and planning by communities and support agencies

The data collected was presented and verified by the community in an *Up Gram Sabha* meeting and corrections made. The problems and potentials for each ward were analysed. Each *Up Gram Sabha* discussed in depth the issues related to natural resources, social justice, and infrastructural needs.

⁶ Each revenue village in HP has been surveyed. *Cadastral* maps showing boundaries, ownership etc. of each private and Government land parcel are available at the office of the Land Revenue official for that revenue village. Maps were last updated in 1976. Each revenue village in HP has been surveyed. *Cadastral* maps showing boundaries, ownership etc. of each private and Government land parcel are available at the office of the Land Revenue official for that revenue village. Maps were last updated in 1976.

A ward land-use map prepared by the eight members of the ward planning team, two of whom are women. They are semi-literate, local villagers with no prior training. The associated Land Status Register contains information about the ownership, production, and status (good, moderate, or bad) of each plot of land in the ward. The land-use planning identifies problems and potentials with each landscape element.



With the help and support of specialists and field staff from the line departments, technical solutions to the problems and potentials identified in each ward were analysed. Some proposed activities fitted into the existing departmental schemes while others had to be supported through innovative grants. Putting together the problems and their solutions, along with the technical details, resulted in the ward draft plans (WDPs). The community collectively discussed the options and solutions generated in these plans. In an open meeting, all the members of the *Up Gram Sabha* reached consensus on priorities and approved the final ward plan. A typical WDP consists of:

- self-help activity list – to be implemented by the community with its own resources;
- line department lists – priorities for line departments that they must respect;
- works to be done by the *Panchayat* with its own funds that it receives; and,
- activities to be taken up through other projects working in the area – special schemes from Central Government, bilateral projects etc.

Panchayat-level plan formulation

The WDCs of all of the wards falling in each *Panchayat* came together in a two-day conference. Each ward action plan was presented by the Ward Development Committee and was sectorally integrated at *Panchayat* level to form the draft PMP whose outputs consisted of three very specific sets of activities:

Activities to be undertaken by *Panchayat* from its own funds

Each *Panchayat* has some untied funds (from Central and State Governments) and its own revenue. Allocations were determined by the priorities of PMP and an annual plan of operation was made.

Activities to be undertaken by concerned line departments

These are department-specific lists that integrate the priorities from each ward plan at the *Panchayat* level. The departments are expected to implement their activities using these priorities over the next five years, as these had already been verified at community level during the planning process.

Project packages

Special activities were developed into packages for Central Government, bilateral schemes, or project funds.

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In addition, the prioritised lists of individual beneficiaries for the different state- and central-level welfare schemes were also collated at the *Panchayat* level. This made the selection of beneficiaries fully decentralised and community-driven.

At a special *Gram Sabha* meeting called by the *Panchayat*, the draft PMP was tabled and approved. This draft plan was a strategic tool that ensured community control and ownership of their negotiated developmental priorities. The *Panchayat*-level standing committees were also formed from members nominated by *Up Gram Sabhas*. The next task was to send the relevant parts of the plan to the relevant agencies to act on, including the deputy commissioner's office at district level.

The guidelines and procedures for activities to be implemented by village-level works committees were based on the HP *Panchayat* financial rules to ensure conformity and ease in implementation. Actions to integrate *Panchayat*- and block-level plans are now underway. Significantly, the Bhatiat pilot block has encouraged other State-level institutions wanting to develop and demonstrate their sectoral plans as parts of PMP to converge and undertake their trials on a common platform in Bhatiat (including the health and family welfare department and the HP Forest Sector Reforms Project).

Positive impacts of the PMP process

- The strategic role of the *Up Gram Sabha* village community as a basic unit planning has been demonstrated. Marginalized sections of the communities (women, scheduled castes, and the poor) who were earlier excluded in the *Gram Sabha* meetings have found a community platform and have become active in accessing schemes and voicing their problems.
- The previous planning processes of the *Panchayats* often did not include natural resources or social justice, core concerns for sustainable development. The new PMP process emphasises these in order to build *Panchayats* as institutions with social equity and long-term assets – and not merely bodies

providing infrastructure. For example, the *Panchayats* are now supporting reforestation and soil and water conservation works through the standing committees.

- The listing of genuine beneficiaries for the Government welfare schemes and their prioritisation by the different village communities sitting together as an *Up Gram Sabha* was a novel innovation. The beneficiaries were selected on merit and not on political considerations, demonstrating the strength of planning at village/community level to all participants.
- *Panchayats* and ward planning teams are trained in participatory tools and planning processes, with 35–65 trained volunteers in each *Panchayat*. This is a long-term human resource investment. Selected volunteers from these teams are now working as facilitators in other nearby *Panchayats*, meaning the PMP has the potential for self-replication. The involvement of the *Panchayat Samiti* and the *Zila Parishad* members throughout the PMP process has sensitised and prepared them to play a supportive role in sanctioning financial allocations for the PMP at block- and district-level.
- The *Panchayats* have formulated their annual plans of operation (APOs) for 2003–04 using their own funds based on the micro-plan priorities. This is unique because previously, the secretary (a Government employee) would make the plan with no involvement from the *Gram Sabhas*. The *Panchayat* executives are now able to formulate APOs reflecting ward-level priorities themselves. The communities can crosscheck the APOs, which serves as a useful check for accountability.
- Documents outlining five-year plans for the *Panchayats* are now ready as PMPs. They articulate clear needs for the different user groups in different wards for each of the line departments. This document can (and should) be used as a reference (with complete household-level and baseline data) by all external agencies, without them having to continue their parallel investigations.
- The hitherto inactive statutory *Panchayat* standing committees are now armed with the citizens' approval and the *Panchayat's* support, and are working to assist and monitor the *Panchayat* in implementing the PMPs. The allocation of funds from the block level is now based on the needs of the people and not at the selective discretion of bureaucrats and politicians.
- Civil servants were relieved that the major problems of mobilising communities and of consensus formation were to a large extent resolved by the PMP process. Politicians, who were initially reserved, now find that this process does not undermine their authority; instead it helps them to focus on majority-based priorities instead of on the pressures from

minority groups that had previously led to the splitting of their votes and rampant infighting within communities.

Limitations of PMP

- There is a need to enhance the involvement of line departments in the process through using their specialist advice to communities on technical solutions to the problems and potentials emerging from the initial plans.
- The PMP process needs to be made more participatory by facilitating it as a mass campaign involving all sections of the society, instead of as a top-down Government-run activity. The participation of women and other vulnerable groups can be enhanced by having specific and separate confidence-building meetings and activities with them.
- The integration of the emergent PMPs into block- and district-level planning systems must be addressed, as this is currently a key weakness in the process. The district level offers a platform for the convergence of community-based planning processes with the more strategic and centralised process of macro planning from the top. For this, the ongoing engagement with the *Panchayat Samitis* and *Zila Parishads* will have to be accelerated.
- More people-friendly systems of fund routing, agreements, and audits have to be tested to strengthen implementation of the PMPs.
- Documentation of successes and constraints need to be shared with the government, the PRIs, and the NGOs/bilateral agencies for them to advocate changes to the relevant procedures and statutes.

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Lessons learnt

The process of decentralisation is a long-drawn one and its impacts are incremental and not always tangible. Community-based planning approaches like PMP provide an immediate remedy to some of the problems arising out of centralised planning and implementation. Political will, commitment from the Civil Service, and the mobilisation of communities to use the process of decentralisation for better local governance increases the speed at which these processes can be core-streamed to positively affect Government planning and allocation systems. The experiences of designing and introducing PMP in Himachal show that it is possible for semi-literate communities in the mountains to work in a participatory mode and deliver community-based plans into the hands of PRIs, making them better institutions of local governance.

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