

Decentralized District Planning – The Road Ahead from Vaishali

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The Eleventh Five Year Plan has stressed that it is absolutely critical for the inclusiveness of India's growth process that the large numbers of elected local government representatives are fully involved in planning, implementing and supervising the delivery of essential public services. While most states of India have enacted legislations for the constitution of District Planning Committees in conformity with Article 243ZD of the constitution, the actual involvement of *panchayati raj* institutions in formulating decentralized district plans has remained quite limited across the country.

The article reflects upon the experiences and learnings from an Integrated District Planning exercise undertaken by *Panchayati Raj* Institutions in Vaishali district of Bihar with support from Unicef, PRAXIS and CENCORED. Conducted in line with relevant guidelines of Planning Commission, the exercise was aimed at strengthening the District Planning Committee of Vaishali, by way of provision of technical, secretarial and capacity building support. The author is associated with Praxis – Institute for Participatory Practices.

Is a state like Bihar ready for decentralized planning? I have often pondered over the dilemma posed by the excitement of supporting some highly promising processes of integrated district planning in Vaishali district of Bihar, in the contrasting backdrop of a not-too-favourable policy environment at the state level, which has failed to devolve any meaningful roles, powers or finances for the agencies of local self-governance even sixteen years after the 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution took effect! Even more disturbing are the signs of increasing centralization of powers – clearly evident, for instance, in provisions like Sections 79 and 75 of Bihar Municipal Bill 2007, empowering the State Government to direct urban local bodies to undertake any work within the ambit of the 12th Schedule of the Constitution of India regardless of the source of funds, and to change the expenditure limits of municipal bodies by way of notifications issued from time to time. The motives underlying such moves are hard to fathom!

Successive State Finance Commissions in Bihar have not been able to press upon the State government the need of devolution of adequate financial resources for the *panchayati raj* institutions (PRIs) of the state, thereby failing on an important constitutional duty. The contrasts with most other states are glaring; for instance, while the 3rd State Finance Commission of Kerala provided for devolution of over 1,950 Crore rupees in favour of PRIs (for the base year of 2006-07; including grants for development, maintenance and general purposes and subject to 10% annual increment), Bihar hasn't committed any assured share for its PRIs out of its revenue proceeds or plan outlay. The only sources of money for the PRIs of Bihar are the grants received from Central Finance Commission, besides a promissory share of 3% in the net tax realizations at the local level and funds received under the schemes of NREGA and BRGF. Unfortunately, the method of execution of these schemes leaves little control in the hands of the elected representatives!

Yet, the experience of working towards the emergence of one of the first integrated district plan in the country, in partnership with multiple stakeholders in Vaishali has had its own highs. In an inception workshop held in the beginning of the process, the members of the *Zilla Parishad* and urban local bodies of the district stated their full commitment to the process despite occasional expressions of skepticism stemming from past experiences, recalling how most district-level plans have traditionally been formulated by line departments or the officialdom, bypassing any involvement of elected representatives. They also nominated a steering body of representatives to oversee the district planning process under the Chairmanship of the District Magistrate (DM). Subsequently, the DM played an important role in convening a meeting of all the

important district level officers, including heads of various line departments and all the Sub-Divisional Officers and Block Development Officers posted in the district, for a daylong discussion on the significance of the planning process. The workshop brought about a rare opportunity for the district level officers to collectively analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and constraints faced by the district in various crucial sectors and to formulate a roadmap for undertaking the participatory planning exercise. The workshop not only yielded useful leads for the planning exercise, but also brought about an air of sanctity regarding the decentralized planning process entrusted to *panchayati raj* institutions. Subsequently, when the planning process was rolled out across various local bodies of the district, it enjoyed the support of a good range of stakeholders.

The support received from various local bodies was due also to an intensive round of workshops involving key functionaries of *gram panchayats* and urban local bodies in Vaishali. Representatives of every single institution of local self-governance were invited to these workshops, which ran for over two months across 32 batches. In addition to the *Mukhiyas*, the deputy *Mukhiyas* (who, in many cases, represent the opposition at the *panchayat* level), the *Panchayat Sachivs* and the *Rozgar Sevaks* of all the *panchayats* were also invited to the residential trainings, in order that sufficient capacities and interests are generated at the village level for decentralized planning to be a continuous process. The workshops brought about a rare occasion for the local level leaders to come together, deliberate on burning issues related to local governance, narrate their experiences and enhance capacities to undertake planning in an inclusive and participatory manner.



Institutional arrangements for the planning process

One of the most crucial arrangements contributing to the planning process in Vaishali was the establishment of a District Planning and Monitoring Cell (DPMC), aimed at providing secretarial support to the District Planning Committee. The Cell, set up with support from Unicef, played a critical role in liaising with key stakeholders in the district, facilitating vital communications on time and in organizing important events. Endowed with a small team of professionals and a good balance of essential

competencies, which included skills as diverse as conducting training, managing databases and maintaining close contact with key government officials, the team did well to keep the process on track. Housed within a walking distance from the District Collectorate, the DPMC office remained a bustling hub of activity during the entire planning exercise.

At the local level, steering committees were formed at the level of each ward (unit of representation of about 500 people in rural areas; and between 1200 – 15000 people in urban areas, depending upon the type of municipality) to support the elected representatives at the ward level in the planning process. This was a pioneering arrangement at the ward level, not envisaged even in the Bihar *Panchayati Raj* Act 2006. While the Bihar Municipality Act 2007 provides for constitution of Ward Committees, such bodies have not been formed in most municipal bodies in the state, including those in Vaishali. Each set of plan suggestions emerging from the level of wards was duly signed off by at least twenty local residents constituting the ward level steering committees. While this helped in making the process democratic at the local level, formal involvement of at least twenty people in each ward also made fulfillment of the quorum (twentieth part of the total number of voters in a *panchayat*, amounting roughly to about 210 voters) for a valid *gram sabha* much easier!

However, several threatening developments kept popping up during the course of the planning exercise, jeopardizing the prospects of the process. Midway through the process, all the *panchayat* secretaries posted in the district were transferred, leading to widespread protests and occasional resistance to the planning exercise as well. For the facilitators of the village level planning process, it made access to secondary data pertaining to the *panchayats* very difficult and delayed the planning process in several *panchayats*. The process also witnessed transfer of the District Magistrate, the Deputy Development Commissioner, the District Planning Officer and a Sub Division Officer midway through the planning process, though any potential ill-effects of these transfers were preempted by prompt follow-ups with the new occupants of these positions and securing their support to the planning exercise.

More surprisingly, activities related to a parallel planning process for the Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF) emerged as a key threat to the 'integrated' nature of the planning exercise undertaken in Vaishali. One morning, it came to the knowledge of the District Planning and Monitoring Cell that some people are approaching the *Panchayat Mukhiyas* for suggestions regarding the contents of BRGF plans for the year 2010 – 2011! This seemed to bypass the integrated planning process and undermine its sanctity. A prior scrutiny of the BRGF plans of Vaishali for previous years had pointed at numerous choices of interventions that were more appropriately suited for financing under various flagship schemes of the government of India and did not seem to make a good case for being picked up under BRGF! Also, the budget estimates for the village level BRGF plans for previous years had exceeded the financial ceilings by far and the District Development Commissioner had to ask for a downward revision of the plan sizes to suit the BRGF funds available in the district last year! Alarmingly, most of the BRGF plans of the previous years had not been ratified by the *gram sabhas* and had to be returned by the District Planning Officer for endorsement from the people's forum!

Thankfully, on taking up the matter with the District Planning Officer, an instruction was promptly issued from the DM's office to all the BDOs to ensure that no plan, regardless of sector, department or scheme, should be allowed to escape the purview of the integrated district planning process, and making it mandatory for parallel plans, if any, to be endorsed by the *gram sabhas* during discussions on the integrated plan!

The issue regarding the BRGF plans, however, brought about an important learning related to the use of BRGF funds, particularly its potential to completely derail or undermine an integrated planning exercise, unless clear safeguards were provided to prevent its misuse. Ideally, BRGF funds should be utilized only to facilitate integrated planning processes and to finance aspired interventions that cannot be taken up under available schemes. This also established the need for better convergence between agencies dealing with diverse schemes. While the Department of *Panchayati Raj* is the nodal agency for BRGF, the Department of Planning has the mandate of ensuring integrated district plans.

Bringing about a collective interest in the planning process

The roadmap to the decentralized planning process in Vaishali was drawn in an inception workshop involving all members of the District *Panchayat* as well as key municipal bodies in the district, including the Hajipur *Nagar Parishad* and the *Nagar Panchayats* of Lalganj and Mahnar. It was probably the first time in the history of the district that elected representatives from both the urban as well as rural streams of local governance came together to deliberate upon an exercise of common interest. The workshop also involved the District Magistrate and brought about an important opportunity of direct interaction between the elected representatives and the administrative head of the district. This also established an important sense of concurrence regarding the choice to pursue an integrated District Planning exercise across all stakeholders.

Snapshots from the Inception Workshop, involving elected members of local self-governance bodies in Vaishali



Chairpersons of local bodies and DM lighting the lamp



DM making a point



Praxis representative making a presentation



Elected representatives at the Inception Workshop



Chairpersons of Hajipur Nagar Parishad & Vaishali Zilla Parishad

The workshop played a crucial role in prompting a marginalized community of people's representatives to assume an active role in the planning process. Initial expressions of skepticism gave way to voluntary commitments of support to the planning exercise and several members of the District *Panchayat* and the *Nagar Parishad* nominated themselves for playing a steering role.

Another important event that wielded enormous influence on the momentum of the planning exercises at different levels was a workshop that brought together the entire team of district administration to commit itself to the success of the unprecedented

District Planning exercise. The workshop was held in a highway motel, detached from the daily buzz and business of government offices in the district. The participants included the District Magistrate, the Additional Collector (Revenue), all the Sub Division Magistrates, all the Block Development Officers and key functionaries of various line departments, including the District level Officers related to departments of Planning, *Panchayati Raj*, Education, Health, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Horticulture and Welfare, amongst others. In the workshop, the participants deliberated upon important strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges facing the district in the key sectors of education, health, development of women and children, infrastructure, poverty reduction and environment. Subsequently, dates were identified for rolling out the process across various blocks, including dates for visioning workshops at various levels.

Snapshots from the workshop involving senior government officers in Vaishali



Unicef Representative making a point, flanked by DM, DSO



District, Subdivision and Block Level Officers of Vaishali



Praxis representative making a presentation



District level officers engaged in a group discussion

Capacity building and deployment of process facilitators

A pool of 32 people was carefully selected and deployed across the district to extend support to local bodies in undertaking the planning exercise. The facilitators were identified by Cencored – a reputed organization based in Patna – and recruited after an interview and written test conducted by a panel inclusive of the District Planning Officer and representatives of Unicef, Praxis and Cencored. They were provided with a detailed orientation to the significance, objectives and design of the decentralized planning process in a four-day residential workshop held at Hajipur, followed by a pilot fieldwork in a *panchayat* of Lalganj block. The performance of the facilitators during the pilot fieldwork helped in identifying lead facilitators for different clusters of villages.

Initially, the facilitators were divided into 4 teams of 6 people and each team was allotted a cluster of 4 blocks of Vaishali district for extending support to the planning

process in a gradual and continuous manner. The remaining facilitators were assigned the responsibility of conducting trainings for the functionaries of *gram panchayats* and urban local bodies in a residential setting. The field-teams moved out to different villages in pairs and started contacting the leaders of local bodies for initiating the planning exercise. In particular, they were expected to extend support to a few critical activities of the planning process, including a pre-process meeting of key stakeholders of the village, a local level visioning exercise for articulating desired transformations over a five year period, a mapping exercise to identify key intervention opportunities in the village, a meeting of *panchayat* leaders to prepare for *gram sabhas* and support in ensuring that the *gram sabha* meetings are held in a democratic and inclusive manner. In terms of number of days, each pair of facilitators was roughly expected to visit each *panchayat* between seven to ten times for ensuring timely accomplishment of the planning exercise.

Snapshots from the capacity building workshop for facilitators in Vaishali



A training session for the facilitators in progress



The District Planning Officer addressing the facilitators

Initially, the pace of activity relating to the planning exercise was relatively slow. Key factors affecting the pace included elections to Primary Agriculture Cooperative Societies held in the state after more than a decade, transfer of *panchayat* secretaries and a number of important festivals including *Eid-ul-Fitr*, *Durga Puja*, *Diwali* and *Chhath*. It forced a rethink of the operational strategies and led to entrustment of each individual facilitator with a revised, output-linked scheme of compensation. While such a mid-course revision of the terms of work created a good deal of pressure on the facilitators (resulting also in the threat of mid-course resignation by some facilitators and hoarding of plan documents by some), they needed to be addressed with a delicate balance of motivational inputs and strict instructions for adherence to deadlines!

Visioning for local development

During the planning process, visioning sessions were facilitated at the level of the district, blocks and *gram panchayats*, involving elected people's representatives and key government functionaries. In line with the six categories of development goals formulated by the Government of Bihar, the participants of the visioning workshops were divided into groups and requested to think of key transformations aspired by them with regard to opportunities of income enhancement and poverty reduction; status of education; quality of health care; basic infrastructure; development of women and children, and status of environment. The visioning workshops were convened by the Block Development Officers of respective blocks and typically included leaders and members of *panchayat samitis*, *mukhiyas* and functionaries of *gram panchayats* or urban local bodies falling within a block, besides officers and government functionaries deputed at the block level.

Snapshots from a block-level visioning workshop held in Mahua block of Vaishali



Mahua BDO, flanked by *Up-Pramukh* of *Panchayat Samiti*



A people's representative making a point



Panchayat Samiti members visioning in groups



A *Panchayat Samiti* member presenting a shared vision

Planning processes were initiated in the local communities immediately after the visioning workshops held at the block level. A start-up meeting was held in each village, involving the elected leaders and key local stakeholders, during which a village-specific roadmap for the planning exercise was drawn and a visioning exercise was conducted for identification of key transformations aspired by the residents of the village. In some villages, a participatory mapping exercise was also conducted on the same day to assess distribution of vital resources and for identification of intervention opportunities. Roles were distributed amongst the participating villagers to bring about large-scale awareness about the ensuing planning exercise and for constitution of ward level steering groups to support the planning activity.

On an average, the entire planning exercise took between one to three weeks in various villages. Once the important, prioritized needs pertaining to different sectors were identified from various wards of a local body, the members of Executive Committee of the *gram panchayats* came together to collate the same and prepare for presentation before a *gram sabha*. At least a week's notice was served for convening the *gram sabhas*, which were mostly conducted during the months of September and October (the first *gram sabha* related to the district planning exercise was held on August 13, 2009 in Sherpur Chhatwara *panchayat* of Mahua block). Barring occasional instances of conflict and resistance, which were due mostly to divergent political affiliations of the *panchayat* leaders and participants of the *gram sabhas*, the public meetings went off peacefully in most places. In some difficult places, the facilitators had to struggle hard to locate the *panchayat* leaders during or after a *gram sabha* for securing their signature on the plan documents. One of the important advices given to the facilitators during their training

earlier was about ensuring that the plans emerging from the participatory processes were recorded in the official register of the *gram panchayat*!

Snapshots from the planning exercise and *gram sabhas* held in Vaishali



A *gram sabha* meeting in progress



The *Mukhiya* of Gadai Sarai *panchayat* in a public meeting

Leaving behind capacities for decentralized planning

In addition to training of leaders and key functionaries of the local bodies, one of important strategies employed in the process was identification of one competent local resource person in each village by the facilitators, to work closely with them and avail of hands-on training in facilitation to be able to support similar planning exercises undertaken in future. Identification of such local resource persons helped the facilitators immensely in accessing important information about the villages and in establishing contact with key local people.

Salient learnings from the Vaishali experience

Lack of clarity about financial outlays at various levels in a district appeared as a big challenge for the district planning exercise, which made the planning exercise somewhat speculative, though based on an examination of expenditure data for previous years. Timely preparation of clear 'resource envelopes', disaggregated for various levels, sectors and schemes, should be an essential prerequisite for initiating integrated decentralized planning processes, to preempt situations where plan-sizes and contents are required to be revised undemocratically at a later stage! However, given that the planning process in Vaishali was undertaken well in advance for the financial year 2010 – 2011, there is a significant opportunity of informing the process of laying down district level plan targets and financial outlays undertaken by the Department of Planning at the state level.

The Backward Region Grant Funds provide an extremely significant window of opportunity to *Panchayati Raj* Institutions to undertake decentralized planning across a wide range of local needs. However, it seems BRGF-aided planning processes being undertaken in many districts with support from various technical support agencies have got reduced to a parallel planning exercise, often with little or no involvement of *gram sabhas*. Ideally, micro-plans prepared with support from provisions like BRGF should emerge as a singular point of reference for all schemes and interventions meant for local development. Once an integrated, comprehensive plan is prepared and approved by *gram sabhas*, it should leave no need for any parallel planning exercise to be undertaken for any scheme or purpose, by any line department or agency – at least with regard to direct interventions at the level of people. Thereafter, only those interventions ought to be supported under BRGF that cannot be taken up under any of the regular schemes. In

many districts, BRGF seems to have become sort of a 'compensation' for *Panchayati Raj* Institutions after being denied their due opportunity of influencing interventions stemming from various line departments!

Any integrated district planning exercise, whether undertaken under BRGF or otherwise, must ensure prior concurrence amongst various stakeholders, regarding the need to preempt any parallel planning processes. This would necessarily demand formal workshops or interactions with functionaries of various line departments, officers at block and sub-division levels, and all heads of various planning-support functions at the district level (e.g. the DM, DDC, DPRO or DPO) to preempt such possibilities. Key planning bodies at the state and national levels must also play an active role in facilitating such concurrence, and ensure steps towards integrated planning processes.

Agencies facilitating integrated district plans must necessarily have a capacity building perspective for strengthening *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, and must invest greater efforts in bolstering democratic processes rather than in dealing with relatively less significant technicalities of plan outputs. Design of training modules for PRI leaders must include inputs around issues of equity, accountability and democratic governance, and should not be limited merely to technicalities of planning processes. The choice of technical support agencies and assessment of their perspectives and strategies hold crucial significance to this effect.

Every effort needs to be made to respect the sanctity of integrated plans emerging from the PRIs, by ensuring timely release of funds for implementation, and setting up of monitoring mechanisms at the level of standing committees of PRIs and vigilance committees at the level of Gram Sabhas. Monitoring indicators should be spelt out at the stage of planning itself and must include clear delineation of roles and accountabilities. At the district level, Monitoring Cells need to be set up within District Planning Committees to track the progress of district planning processes and to extend facilitation support to diffuse emerging problems, if any. Establishment of a District Planning and Monitoring Cell in Vaishali district, aimed at providing secretariat support to the District Planning Committee, helped significantly in preparation of an integrated district plan for the year 2010-11 in the district.

Convergence-facilitation units need to be set up within the structures of District Planning Committees, including representatives of various line departments, to extend help in finalization of interventions on the basis of integrated plans. Such units need to be set up also at the state level, for guiding convergence across various line departments.

Finally, the process of integrated district planning must start well in advance, preferably immediately after the completion of the planning and budgeting processes at the state level, and conclude by around November so as to feed the state level processes of planning for the following year. The commotion experienced towards the end of the planning process in Vaishali to meet the November deadline, necessitating avoidable revisions in the operational strategies, could be avoided if the processes of capacity building and planning had started at least a couple of months earlier.
