

Children lead the way to decentralisation and civil society participation

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For the past few years, the Government of Karnataka has been trying to enable the participation of civil society in the formulation of plans through the vitalisation of Gram Sabhas without much success. This year participatory planning was made possible through the active involvement of children in the formulation of Five Year Plans in all the 56 Panchayats of Kundapura Taluk, Udupi District. This process was facilitated by the Concerned for Working Children (CWC).

This exercise was a journey in active participatory democracy, a practical demonstration of grass root 'bottom up' planning and a realisation of a citizen's 'right to information' and all this with children leading the way!

In retrospect, it was found that the involvement of children, their enthusiasm, their unerring sense of justice and their compassionate response to people's problems is what drew adults into this process. If children had not been the prime movers, adults would not have been involved in such large numbers and like in the past the task of drawing up the plans would have remained with the Secretary of the Gram Panchayat with some inputs from some of the elected members. Adults are cynical and wary of any possible change because of their conditioning to the 'real world', whereas children still have hope and the belief that they can change the world. Their efforts, when they bear fruit, also serves as a role model for grown ups, and adults once again begin to have hope. Children also grow up, and if they have a positive experience of participation in governance they carry that with them into adulthood. Politics is an integral aspect of our life. Good politics is essential for the progress of any country. Here children have been involved in defining 'good politics'. This is not only a role model for children but also for adults in the entire country. The Five Year Planning process in Udupi District is one such experience.

This process however, has also raised many questions regarding the model of decentralisation we as a country have adopted; a micro replication of the centralised structures we have where the control to a large extent still remains with the State and Central Governments.

Though the legislative intention is democratic decentralisation where every individual has a say, the models of democracy available in India are centralised power centres with top-down structures. These centres of power and decision-making have decentralised their reach by constructing

they have gained a deeper understanding of the Panchayat's needs and concerns. The gap between the local government and the people has diminished.

This process that the children have been involved in is not only 'developmental planning' - it is a movement for democracy at the very base, the village. This was Gandhi's vision, but the translation of this vision into practice remained a challenge. This intervention by children is an important step in that direction.

The entire planning process was in essence practising democracy, experiencing democracy and learning from it. Such processes are extremely important to build and sustain a democratic nation. The present system rarely provides such opportunities for children or adults. What we read and learn is very different from what we actually practise. Sometimes they are even contradictory. This process is an example of how democracy can and should be practised and how children can take part in decision-making processes.

Here, children were involved in taking decisions at the level of the local government. Their two significant achievements are the creation of a 'political space or forum' that they can use to present their views and concerns and the setting up of a process and structure to practice true democracy - something that until now they had only read about in books.

Local governments should be in a position to take decisions about their villages. Through this intervention they have proved that they are capable of analysing information, mapping the resources they have and deciding what they need and under what terms and conditions.

Though this process was constrained by lack of time it can evolve into a formal and replicable system that can be up scaled for the whole state. It is a good beginning. It will enable governments at higher levels to view the Gram Panchayats with more respect and as governments with geographical and political jurisdiction. The planning process that has taken place in Kundapur is an important step in this direction.

It is said that the stream of globalisation cannot be stopped. Most people, even those who oppose it, seem to believe that the present model of globalisation is here to stay and we can do little to change this. However, the Kundapur example shows that it is possible to challenge the very basis of globalisation and centralised undemocratic decision making. Such processes can be a strong counter to globalisation.

For the present model of globalisation to work, there is a need for centralised set-ups with decentralised implementation, and our present system of governance is conducive to this. Our decision-making is centralised and the local governments function like local agencies to implement these decisions. But real participatory planning processes turn this model on its head. It can question and challenge centralised decisions and make it possible for local governments to take decisions and to strengthen themselves as the representative of all the people of that Panchayat.

If there are 5000 people in a Panchayat, the local government is capable of mobilising all 5000 of them. No other government, at the state or centre, can make such a claim. The Gram Panchayats can do this. They can bring the people of the Panchayat together, discuss issues, build on experiences and challenge globalisation. Processes such as these make it possible to change the course of globalisation.

In the early days of the Panchayat Toofan programme in Kundapur, the then president of the Panchayat and the Makkala Mitra, Sri Balanna, made a demand for an Anganwadi to the Department of Women and Child Development. The representatives of the department said that they would not sanction the Anganwadi at the location suggested by the Panchayat. The president then said, *"The children and the women have asked for the Anganwadi here as it will be most convenient I can see they are right. If you insist that the Anganwadi should be located at the place you suggest, I suggested that you leave. It is the children of our Panchayat that need it, the place belongs to us and the programme is here to serve the needs of our children. If you are not able to meet requirements we suggest you close down your three other Anganwadis as well"*.

Balanna had the courage to say 'no' to programmes that were not responding to the real needs of his people only because of the active and informed participation of children and thereby the whole community. Through this he was also able to understand the real needs of children. He had the support of his people. Prior to the involvement of children and their participation in the governance of the Panchayat, he had not had the courage to question the relevance of schemes or programmes thrust on him. Now he was sure that even if the department left, he and the Panchayat would be able to run the Anganwadis because of the participation of adults and children.

The present model of globalisation can only be challenged by such people and processes. These may be small beginnings, but as they say, little streams make an ocean. The children of Kundapur Taluk have shown the way and adults have been inspired to take up the challenge to struggle for true decentralisation and participatory democracy. We have been enriched by this experience and recharged to continue pursuing our goals. The children are rearing to take this to its logical end and to get on with the implementation of the plans. We hope that you will draw sustenance from this example and find ways to take it forward.