Capacity Building for Educational Governance at Local Levels

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Contemporary discourse on education management in all countries is full of references to various concepts that directly or indirectly point to the need for shifting the system of educational governance from central to local levels. In the policy literature one finds this referred to in various ways as decentralized management, local school management, increased role for the civil society, community empowerment in school management, and so on. All these indicate to a process of transformation of the existing system of educational governance. But in reality, change on the ground is not keeping pace with the pronouncements made in policy and planning documents. Resistance among the central authorities to give up their powers is not unexpected. But the slow progress in transforming the system seems to be equally due to lack of understanding and capabilities among the new stakeholders to power at the local level on their precise roles and responsibilities.

In the traditional management framework, educational institutions such as schools are viewed as mere recipient bodies implementing the decisions made for the larger system. Changing this perspective and shifting the locus of control over education to the local level, possibly located in the school itself, demands a total change in perspective. But, how would this change be brought in? This throws a major challenge as governance at the local level requires a new set of skills and attitude among all the stakeholders.

Are the traditional programmes of in-service education of headmasters and school teachers geared to meet this challenge? In fact, local level governance of education brings a new kind of clientele to the forefront for capacity building, namely, community members. Do community members who would take up new roles for governance of education need special orientation? How should such orientation be organized? Do the existing institutional arrangements suffice to reach out to all of them? What would be the nature of inputs to be provided in such capacity-building efforts with respect to different groups of stakeholders from the school, the community and the education department? These are some of the important questions addressed in this article.

The Context

In fact, participation of the local community in education management has a long historical legacy. After all, the first schools were founded and even funded solely by local community groups. The state entered the scene much later in the history of schooling. Initially, the role of the school had been to wean the individual away from the emotional world of the home in order to socialize in the outside world, and to introduce young men and women to the rational world of knowledge and learning. With the onset of industrialization, along with the emphasis on compulsory schooling and education for informed citizenship, national governments began to take over the responsibility of funding and organizing school education. This, in some ways, set the stage for distancing the local community from educational governance. With the evolution of 'national systems of education', governments began asserting their authority and control over the system of schooling as fully legitimate. Today, all over the world, it is the prerogative of the national governments to determine the shape of the school system as a publicly funded phenomenon.

Seen in the above evolutionary perspective, the current focus on participation of the local community in school governance is actually an instance of "coming round full circle"—the return of the prodigal. Is it not paradoxical? Perhaps, one has to unscramble the backdrop and context to understand what this return of educational governance to the local community means, in rhetoric and in reality.

The Indian scene at the grassroots level presents too varied a picture to draw a generalized one of the context. As discussed in the introduction to this volume, while some states have gone a long way in transferring not only powers, but also a substantial proportion of state funds to Panchayati Raj bodies, some others have chosen to keep considerable control in the hands of the bureaucracy at the decentralized levels. Some states have gone for the establishment of quasi-legal bodies such as VECs and SMCs to oversee governance of education at the local levels, whereas several other states have yet to move towards such decentralized management structures. In some cases, not much progress has been made beyond galavanizing PTAs to take greater interest and participate in school-related activities. Each of these models also imply varying perceptions of the policy makers and planners regarding the value of decentralization and local governance. Designing capacity-building activities to suit such varying contexts presents a big challenge.

The move towards greater control over education at local levels, in India as well as elsewhere, seems to have been prompted by three contemporary developments across the world:

1. The recognition of "greater legitimacy of direct control by local stakeholders" over education and several other social sectors—as part of the democratic decentralization framework.
2. The expectation that "smaller management systems are more efficient and accountable"—as part of structural adjustment processes or restructuring public systems.
3. The assumption that quality concerns can be better met by focusing on individual school development than by bringing system level reforms—school autonomy coupled with enhanced accountability becoming a major feature of contemporary reforms for quality assurance.

These contextual parameters, though closely interrelated, present different rationale for establishing local governance systems, and therefore bring with them a special set of issues to be tackled in capacity building for different stakeholders involved in education at the local levels.

Critical Issues Related to Capacity Building

Adopting a Comprehensive Perspective: Who Needs Capacity Building?

Traditional thinking on capacity building focuses almost exclusively on launching training programmes, especially for community leaders who have to take up new responsibilities for governance of education. It is necessary to look beyond this narrow framework. Involvement of the local community in educational governance demands a radical transformation of the organizational culture of the public education management system. Greater involvement of the local community demands that the higher authorities agree to give up certain powers hitherto enjoyed. Also, school control by local stakeholders brings greater pressure on the school authorities to promote transparency and share perspectives with parents. The school authorities cannot merely meet the demands of remotely placed higher authorities and get away even with low efficiency in school functioning. Accountability to local masters is not something many school authorities are familiar with. Seen from this angle, there are at least three distinct groups which need special orientation to function under the changed framework of governance. Accordingly, capacity-building activities have to be designed at three levels—for school personnel, local/community level managers and state education department authorities.

One of the biggest challenges with respect to equipping people involved in local governance of education is the magnitude of the task involved.

What about Academic Supervision and Support Services?

It is necessary to examine the question of linking educational governance with local community control within the local political and developmental context. While the school governing council or village education committee or local self-government body could become the apex body or main body for decision-making with respect to general management issues, questions of academic and professional management have to be independently dealt with. The extent to which community members could be

associated with academic decision-making cannot be a uniform prescription as it depends very much on the profile of the members constituting such management bodies, and the mutual confidence that the teachers and the members of the committee enjoy. Nevertheless, the question of building awareness among the local leadership cannot be ignored.

Further, this also highlights the need for bringing comprehensive reforms combining local governance with more academic autonomy and accountability to the school—the principal and the teachers. A piecemeal approach of transferring powers to local leadership without strengthening internal management of institutions may lead to undue interference and subject the schools to undue political pressure from parochial elements in the local community.

Drawing up a Relevant Curriculum: In What do we Train or Orient the Functionaries?

There are no generic formats for designing and implementing programmes for capacity building. Every programme has to be designed even within a country in a contextualized manner. In some places the need may be more for building social cohesion and interaction skills while in others it could be more professional and technical capabilities. It would also depend on the specific group being dealt with, namely, school authorities, the local leadership or the education department officials. However, certain broad aspects need specific focus in all such programmes. Some of these aspects are illustrated in the following discussion.

Knowledge of Changed Roles and Functions: Studies on decentralized management in many countries have shown that changed rules and regulations often remain only on books and only the central authorities become aware of the changes. People who have to adopt changed roles and functions feign ignorance and continue to follow instructions from above instead of using the powers vested in them. Proper dissemination of the changed framework and its implications for people at different levels is a basic requirement. In this connection, two points need to be borne in mind: *(a)* Such awareness-building exercises are needed for all, not only for the new comers to the field of educational governance, namely, parents and community leaders; and *(b)* The inputs should cover the roles and

functions of stakeholders at all levels, namely, the school, the community and the education department; it is counterproductive to inform people only of the role they have to play without reference to what they could expect from others.

Special Focus on Institutional Management: Traditionally, schools have been at the receiving end of innovation and change in the education sector. Changes that bring about reforms in school education are designed on a system-wide scale and the role of the individual school is to implement these given change processes. In contrast, under local governance of education, the "individuality or uniqueness framework" will begin to replace the "standardized framework" applicable to all schools, with a provision for greater autonomy to the school and the introduction of "school-based management". In many countries, the "school development plan" has become a powerful instrument not only for setting the direction of change and improvement within the school, but also for receiving recognition and support from public funds and building a system of accountability. Thus linking management functions to school development will give a focus for designing the inputs and determining the expectations from different stakeholders.

Development of People Skills: Educational institutions in a centralized management system generally function under considerable seclusion, with the remotely placed state authorities having limited supervisory outreach. With local governance becoming a reality, the situation will change significantly. The school authorities as well as the local community of parents have to acquire new skills in human relations. Teachers and headmasters have to look to building relations beyond the four walls and the parents have to imbibe a sense of active partnership in managing the affairs of the school. Operations within the school have to become more transparent than earlier. Parents and the school authorities have to adopt a positive outlook in their mutual relationship. Mere technical and academic management capabilities will not suffice.

New **Framework for Personnel Management:**   Local governance of education requires a new framework of personnel selection and management. The current practice of appointing teachers to the system and not to an

individual school, prevalent in many countries, needs reconsideration. Also, it is necessary to evolve a new structure for teacher career prospects under the framework, as teachers would belong to a local school or to a smaller network of schools. In fact, studies show that in some of the countries adopting local management measures, teachers are complaining about lack of career opportunities. Designing and implementing appropriate approaches for teacher recruitment and their professional development requires special capabilities on the part of local level educational planners and managers.

Grievance Settlement—Need for a New Code of Conduct Framework: Under the centralized system, teachers and other personnel in the education department are subject to countrywide rules and regulatory procedures. A common framework governs grievance settlement procedures and disciplinary codes. With local governance coming into the picture, the situation is likely to change. Accountability to local authorities is likely to subject the school personnel to undue stress and uncertainty if the local governors of education are not properly oriented. This is important as in many countries, along with local governance, school personnel are coming under considerable fire from local communities, causing avoidable tensions and jeopardizing the interests of the school.

Capacity Building is Not Mere Delivery of Standard Training Packages

In most countries, innovations in management bring with them a series of actions invoking development and delivery of standard training packages. Just as merely changing the rules and regulations by transferring power and authority to local bodies will not suffice, simply training people through standard packages will not do. It demands a changed mindset among all concerned. This is not easy to achieve in places where people have been nurtured to act only on the dictates of higher authorities. Developing new habits of self-determination is a slow and arduous process which has to be tackled with adequate provisions for direct practice, with technical support and professional guidance. Capacity building should, therefore, be viewed as a comprehensive process of facilitating the change-over from centralized management to a system of local governance.

Institutional Arrangement for Capacity Building: Where and Who will Train?

Shifting from central control to local governance opens up a vast new ground unexplored and unexperienced by anyone. In this context, questions of who is capable of imparting knowledge and skills related to local governance, and which institutions could carry the responsibility become very critical. In many countries, the institutional arrangements for planning and management are too few to meet the need. Further, many of them are too remotely placed to reach out to all peripheral parts of the country, nor do they have the requisite expertise to take up the task. Experience shows that decontextualized training given in the form of theoretical orientations on the new rules and regulations are not adequate. These orientations are often given by central authorities who themselves are unaware of the dynamics of implementing them in the field. Therefore, establishing an effective source *of* learning for the trainers themselves needs to be considered seriously.
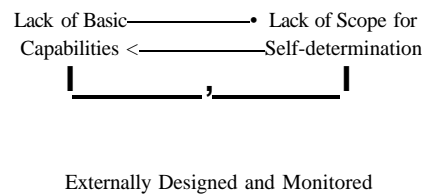
Conclusion

While the need for capacity building does not require any special justification, the critical question to be dealt with is: *Should the practice of local governance wait for capacity building?* One of the biggest obstacles pointed out in many developing countries in implementing local governance measures is the low education development among the local population. It seems that the link between low scope for self-determination at local levels and low-levels of basic education operates as a vicious circle thwarting the change process.

It is true that the field-level personnel in many countries seriously lack planning and management capabilities. But it is difficult to decide whether refusal to change the governance framework is fully explained by the apparent lack of management capacity at the field level. How could they acquire capabilities if they have no opportunity to practice them? It is important to recognize that decentralization represents a way of living and not just a technical strategy.

Transforming a system characterized by centralized decision-making to one where local stakeholders have a significant role is a complex task and is

**Figure 10.1: Link between low scope for self-determination
and low levels at basic education**

Lack of Basic————————• Lack of Scope for
Capabilities <————————Self-determination

Externally Designed and Monitored

Perpetuate Central Control

bound to be a slow process. It is likely to disturb deeply entrenched power relations among different stakeholders. Also, such a transformation cannot be achieved wholly through external inputs and guidance. After all, even those who formulate the new policy framework have no direct experience of functioning in a system of local governance. In such an environment, changing the system requires inculcating the habit of participatory, collective decision-making among those who have been hitherto nurtured in a system of top-down decision-making and implementation. Therefore, new ways of functioning would essentially come through practice more than training. What is required is to accept the new framework for implementation, to allow for some trial and error as part of the learning process, and to simultaneously pursue capacity-building activities. In the final analysis, effective implementation of a local governance system and genuine empowerment of the people at the grassroots level envisages basic transformation in the organizational framework, demands the emergence of a new "world view" of power relations, and requires an abiding faith in democratic processes of decision-making.

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