Community Participation in Rural Development

Grace Dear Kasar[*]

Abstract

Community participation and social accountability are essential for community empowerment. Community empowerment can be achieved if the people at grassroots are involved in the development programs and projects. Development projects without community participation will be devoid of grassroots linkage. Community participation should incline towards cost sharing, project efficiency and self help. A very important component of community participation and accountability is gender empowerment. Women are often under-represented in political and economic decision-making. It is in the interest of the nation and the world to create socio-economic, cultural and political environment favorable for gender empowerment.

NGOs have a policy of engaging community at grassroots level. This has proven to be more effective, accordingly it has been preferred in implementing development projects. Such visible effort has been observed in Ukhrul district, Manipur. The paper intends to study on the achievements of community based rural development activities undertaken by Ukhrul District Community Resources Management Society (UDCRMS)/ IFAD. The paper will highlight success stories in livelihood, women empowerment, skill development and capacity building, rural-agro based industries and infrastructure with the intervention of NGOs. It will study the policy and strategy of community participation introduced by NGOs in rural development activities.

Key Words: Grassroots, Community Empowerment, Community Participation, Accountability, UDCRMS/IFAD

Community Participation in Rural Development

Development is dynamic and never static as defined by Oxford English Dictionary which goes, "Grow or cause to grow and become more mature, advanced, or elaborate" (Oxford). Towards this end every country made its development policy suitable to the polity, socio-economic and cultural fabric of the country. India being rural country had emphasized on rural development since the beginning of plan policy. Here, mention can be made of Community Development Programme

* Asst. Professor, Department of Political Science, St. Joseph College, Ukhrul, Manipur

of 1952, under which the districts in the country are divided into Block Development area to ensure rural development with community participation and empowerment. Without community participation development programs or projects will be Top down Policy implementation which lacks essential grassroots linkage. Sabatier, while analyzing Top down Policy Approach, pointed out that there is lack of direct connection between the central level officers and the local level officers and even with the beneficiaries. Further, in Top Down Approach, the Policy makers are given utmost importance while other actors such as private sectors, local level bureaucrats and local actors are usually ignored (Sabatier, 1986). The policy framers need to look out for more inclusive and participative policy strategy.

Participation enables community to identify themselves with the project and activities happening in their locality. Participation should be inclusive and not exclusive. It should make sure that the most deserving sections get participated. In a country like India, known for diversity with high figure of poverty, it is the poor who should get participated the most in development programs. According to the World Bank's Snapshot 2012, 1 out of every 5 Indians is poor and 80% of the poor live in rural areas, also, poverty is found to be highest among the Scheduled Tribes. It is therefore essential that empowering the poor should be made universal and national slogan. Empowering the poor can be understood in terms of community empowerment as stated by Craig and Mayo (1995). They stated three views on Community empowerment. Firstly, power resides in the society as a whole and empowerment of powerless will not affect the already powerful sections of the society. The second view contradicts the former and opines that power is not a variable sum and as such there is always a resistance to empowering some over the whole. Marxist perspective on power make up the third view which states that, political and economic power is interrelated and thus certain development projects and schemes shall surely empower the powerless (Craig and Mayo, 1995). India, by Constitution is a secular socialist republic state which means that India believes in uplifting the weaker sections and regions of the society; not as a threat to the power enjoyed by some sections but as a mechanism to bring the power to equilibrium. India, therefore, adopted the policy of affirmative action. These socialist ideals and principles have been followed diligently by the successive government in the 70 years of India's independence. Although market and capitalist favoring policy like LPG 1991 was introduced, rationale of India as welfare state has never been compromised. India still has ministries set up especially for welfare activities and rural development. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Tribal Affairs and Ministry of Development of North East Region signify the dedication of India towards the upliftment and betterment of the

marginalized sections in the country. Mention can also be made of various rural development specific schemes or projects such as MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), Pradhan Mantri Awaas Gramin Yojana (PMAGY), Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAYNRLM) and so on. However, it is a sad truth that introduction and implementation of such schemes and projects has not been able to reduce rural inequality. According to Press Information Bureau (PIB), rural inequalities increase for most states of India except states like Sikkim, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chattisgarh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Punjab. From the list of these best performing states regarding rural inequality, only Sikkim from North East managed to occupy a place while the remaining seven sister states were left out in the list.

There is inequality in the North East India region with State Per Capita Income figures as well. As per the Basic Statistic of North Eastern Region (2015) produced by NEC Secretariat, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim have performed better than national average in State Per Capita Income while the remaining four states (Assam, Tripura, Manipur and Meghalaya) performed worse than the national average. Thus, despite decade long experience of development initiatives and projects, the region has not been able to achieve equitable economic benefits.

Such programs and schemes have also failed to bring consistency and sustainability in the distribution of benefits. Even after LPG (liberalization, privatization and globalization), investment has not been coming to North Eastern states like Manipur due to poor infrastructure (Singh, 2007). The North East region displays great diversity in terms of its topography, climate, language, religion, ethnicity and most importantly development challenges. The states are mostly hilly and inhabited by indigenous tribes with a strong dependence on traditional agricultural economy. Development initiatives of the government have failed to make a mark in the region due to imprudent fund utilization, poor governance and negligence of the ground reality at the time of planning (Razi, 2011). Realization of ground reality has become imperative. Community participation and accountability should be the strategy to discover flaws and gaps, whether it be political, administrative, economical or social aspects. In the process of identification and bridging the gaps, community participation should focus on sharing of the costs involved, scope of self dependency for the beneficiaries and efficiency of the project.

Community participation should be holistic. Community is a fabric of various people living together. It is inclusive of people of all genders, age, religion, occupation and so on. Therefore, gender empowerment consist a very important manifestation of community empowerment. If sustainable and equitable growth is to be achieved, women should be given due rec-

ognition of their importance in the functioning of a society. Economic independence, decision making and leadership are major indicators of gender empowerment. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts marked remarkable transition towards gender empowerment. One-third representation of seat is reserved for women in both urban and rural local bodies. This was necessary because women should also be allowed to take decision for the society and be provided with necessary political power to further the cause of empowerment. The government has also been introducing many gender specific schemes and project for women empowerment. Currently, there is a separate Union Ministry, Ministry of Women and Child Development which was upgraded in 2006. It was previously under Human Resource Ministry as a department. The mission of the Ministry given on its official website reads, "Promoting social and economic empowerment of women through crosscutting policies and programmes, mainstreaming gender concerns, creating awareness about their rights and facilitating institutional and legislative support for enabling them to realize their human rights and develop their full potential" (WCD, 2018).

Whether it is rural development in general or gender empowerment in particular, community participation and grassroots engagement is the most reliable, productive and effective strategy. Engaging community through grassroots participation has been the policy of Voluntary Organizations. It has proven to be more cost effective, sustainable and preferred in implementing development projects. Among the agencies and local bodies engaging in rural development, NGOs such as UDCRMS (Ukhrul District Community Resource Management Society) have been successful in making the villagers of the district taste development and sustainability through grassroots linkage. The paper intends to focus on community outreach strategy undertaken by UDCRMS in implementing livelihood projects in rural areas of Ukhrul district. It has been observed that the success of UDCRMS was because of its intensive application of community participation and accountability.

Ukhrul District Community Resource Management Society (UDCRMS): Origin

Bilateral and unilateral partnerships, co-operation and co-ordination among developed, developing and under developing countries and various other stake holders is the need of the hour towards holistic development (Tandon, 2009). Fisher opines that Non Government Organization (NGO) can contribute significantly towards sustainable development in partnership with government (Fisher, 2003). India has also developed its own strategy of state and non-state partnership. One visible example is North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project for Upland (NERCORMP) areas of North East India. This is a livelihood project which was formed with partnership of multi lateral agency IFAD (In-

ternational Fund for Agricultural Development) and the Government of India. The Government of India is represented by the North Eastern Council (NEC), Ministry of Development for North Eastern Region (DoNER). It endeavors to bring socio economic development to the poor people of the North East region of the country. Community based Bottom-Up planning is the principle followed in this project. The rationale of the project is to introduce and demonstrate a new developmental approach in the region, i.e., to "adopt participatory approach, demand driven and client oriented" (UDCRMS, 1999-2008).The project therefore, recognizes community ownership of the rich natural resources and aims to empower them so as to utilize the common pool resources with sustainable practices and eventually conserve and protect the rich biodiversity of the region.

The project was initiated under an MoU signed between the North Eastern Council and Regional Society which contains the roles, responsibilities and expectations of the project. MoU was also signed at the lower level between Regional Society and District Society (North Eastern). In Manipur, Department of Planning, Government of Manipur is the nodal agency headed by a Joint Director. The Department is therefore responsible for all the District Societies established for implementing NERCORMP. It also forward proposals (to the Ministry of DoNER) with administrative approvals after due recommendation by the State Level Committee for Voluntary Organizations/NGOs

(GoM, 2010-11). The first phase of NERCORMP was effective from May 1999 and lasted till September 2008. The second phase, i.e. NERCORMP II had begun in July 2010 which completed in 2016. The areas of operation under NERCORMP II were Assam – Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, Manipur – Ukhrul and Senapati and Meghalaya – West Khasi Hills and West Garo Hills. The third phase, i.e., NERCORPM III was launched with an additional two districts i.e., Chandel and Churachandpur, from Manipur and first three introductory districts of the state of Arunachal Pradesh, viz., Changlong, Tirap and Longding. Therefore all together the project is functional in eleven districts covering four states of North East India (NECORPS, 2018).

The present Society under study was established as a district level society to implement NERCORMP in Ukhrul district. The District Society consists of General Body, an Executive Board and Development Support Team (DST). DST is a core full time team, headed by the Project Manager with a team of officials and expert. The Development Support Team is responsible for identifying clusters and villages for project implementation. It is consider the most significant grassroots connect of the NERCOMP.

Community Participation as Project Strategy of Ukhrul District Community Resource Management Society (UDCRMS):

UDCRMS takes up various livelihood projects in rural areas within the two phas-

es (Phase I and Phase II) of NERCORMP in Ukhrul. It implemented rural projects based on agro-based industries, rural infrastructural development, environment and natural resource, capacity building and so on. Activities undertaken by the Society are categorized into ten groups called "Tables." The most important Tables consist of Economic Livelihood Activities, Community Based Biodiversity Conservation, Social Sector Activities, and Rural Roads & Electrification. Another major work done by the Society is strengthening of traditional skills. Certain activities were undertaken under these table subheads. To bring effectiveness and efficiency, the Society initiated and encouraged the participation of the people at the grassroots community level. Since community based bottom up approach as mentioned earlier is the guiding principle of the project, this is the most crucial level of all.

The Society's adherence to the policy of community participation and accountability can be seen from the following facts:

1. From the very initial stage itself, NERCORMP was implemented only in those villages which get the approval of the community.

2. Community participation in NERCORMP is seen in terms of the existence and vibrancy of local institutions such as SHG (Self Help Groups) and NaRMGs (Natural Resource Management Groups) formed at the grassroots level. SHG is community group con-

fined solely to womenfolk, preferably married women, set up for microcredit purposes. NaRMG stands for Natural Resource Management Group which is established in every project villages. Unlike SHG membership, NaRMG consists of both husband and wife of the village. It is like a village Panchayat with the membership of both male and female.

Every project activity from the Society is implemented through these community bodies. They ensure community participation and accountability in the project. Constant meeting and evaluation is done by these bodies in order to monitor the activities being undertaken.

3. District Support Team, which is the implementing agency of UDCRMS, and partner NGOs constantly visited the project villages to monitor and evaluate progress and also to establish strong community linkage. The members of SHGs and NaRMGs are also regularly imparted training in capacity building and alternative livelihood skills.

4. The Society encouraged the self sustainability of the community bodies formed. These bodies have formed themselves into a bigger conglomeration in the form of clusters and some of these collective organizations have tried to independently function as a self generating unit even after the exit of the project.

Community Participation Strategy: A Success

Community participation according to Giri should be "engineered, ignited and guided" (Giri, 2002). UDCRMS has proven that community participation is indeed engineered, ignited and should be guided. Most of the beneficiaries affirmed that activities undertaken by UDCRMS were hugely successful because of the active participation of the community. The beneficiaries felt a sense of ownership and belongingness with the activities of UDCRMS since they were constantly kept engaged. The success of the project benefitted not only the individual but the community as a whole. It boosted the income of the village since source of income generation was diversified. At the village level, the most popular change was seen in forest conservation with every project villages reserving at least 5 hectares of forest. Elinor Ostrom believed that collective action initiated by the community is more successful in maintaining the sustainable practice of common pool resources (Venkatachalam, 2011). Common pool resources belong to the community and everyone has access to it. For equitable and sustainable access to the resources, collective community participation and accountability is the need of the hour. Only collective action and participation can stand against any threat to the community pool resources. The strategy of community participation and accountability practiced by voluntary organizations is worth emulating. Community participation can save the North East India, one of the biodiversity hotspots of the world from further socio-economic and environmental degradation.

Case study 1/Phungtha Village: Every project village was mandated to conserve a minimum area of 5 hectares as community conserved area. This activity also directed the project villages to document flora and fauna, medicinal herbs. A village, Phungtha, located in the Indo Myanmar range has been conserving the Khayang-Phungtha Tilily waterfall(745 feet) mountain range which is home to various animals and birds such as deer, stag, wild boar, leopard, bear, monkey, tragopan, pheasants, hornbill and so on. (Source: Primary Data)

With the contribution and participation of the community, rural social utility buildings such as community halls, guest houses etc were constructed. Community participation in the form of partial financial contribution, labor and raw materials made most activities of the Society successful.

Social accountability and social audit is one factor which strengthens the project. Regular meetings of NaRMGs and SHGs visit of Monitoring and Evaluation Team from DST etc ensures that accountability and transparency is observed in the community. Community leaders were imparted training on record maintenance, internal audit, accountability etc in order to bring professional ethics in their service as community leaders.

Case study 2/Kuingai Village: There exists an inspiring story behind the con-

struction of a school building in Kuingai Village. There was a boy in the village who took keen interest in studies. After he passed 3rd standard exam from the village school, he could not be promoted to higher standard because back then the primary school had classes till 3rd standard only. Eventually, the boy repeated 3rd standard since his parents could not afford his education in the district headquarter or elsewhere. The Project Manager, reportedly, heard the story and decided to assist the village in constructing and upgrading the school. The government upgraded it to 5th standard and the church in the village supported 6th and 7th standard. Thus, all together the school at the time of field visit had classes till 7th standard. Even now students have to shift to the district headquarter or other villages to pursue their secondary level education. The school is surrounded by beautiful cosmos flower, which the village SHG planted and maintained. It was impressive that students were obedient enough not to have plucked the bed of blooming flowers. (Source: Primary Data)

Gender empowerment is another aspect of community based achievement observed due to the intervention of UDCRMS. The practice of SHG has been instrumental in introducing financial independence to many womenfolk in the village. Many were given opportunities to become leaders of their community. The knowledge and the experiences they gained have been sought by the village authority and churches. Opportunity to intermingle with both men and women in entirely different forum has given them newfound independence. Many SHG members took pride that community intensive approach of development has broaden their minds and gave them opportunity to contribute to the family in ways previously unknown to them. The women also affirmed that it has strengthened their decision making power at home and their voice was heard at the village level also.

Case study 3: In Phalee village, an SHG member started her business of weaving enterprise. Women specially the aged come to work at her enterprise and weave traditional attires and also made traditional ornaments. She was able to pay them wages and still earn some profit. Due to her entrepreneur skill, she was given extra loan and grants by the Society and apex micro credit body of Ukhrul district (Ukhrul District Women Institute of Micro-credit)*. (*Source: Primary Data)

Conclusion

The idea of community participation is integral to the social set up of the tribal areas. Tribal's have banked on collective responsibility and accountability which were endorsed through customs, traditions, norms and practices. North East India is a home to many tribal who are indigenous to the region but economically and politically left behind in modern development. Government and NGOs have taken keen interest in the region not simply because development should be equitable but also because of it's strate-

gic importance in India's Act East policy. Thus, while implementing various development projects in tribal inhabited North East India, the most rational strategy would be to build on the inherent collectiveness and cohesiveness of the community.

References:

Craig, Gary and Mayo, Marjorie (1995), *Community Empowerment*, Zed Books Ltd: New Jersey

Fisher, Julie (2003), *Non Governments: NGOs and Political Development of the Third World,* Rawat Publications: New Delhi

Giri, D.K(2002), "People's Participation and Rural Development", *Kurukshetra,* 50(6)

GoM, (2010-11), Annual Administrative Report, State Planning Departmen: Manipur

MDONER, (2018), *www.mdoner.org,* accessed on 20th August, 2018

NEC, (2018), *www.necouncil.gov.in*, accessed on 13th September, 2108

NECORPS (2018), http://www.necorps.org accessed on 18th November, 2018

NERCoMP, (2018), North Eastern Community Resource Management Programme for Upland Areas (NERCoPM), Retrieved from www.mdoner.gov.in)

NIB, (2018), *www.nib.nic.in* accsssed on 14th September, 2018

Oxford (2018), www.en.oxforddictionaries.com accessed on 13th September, 2018

Razi, Shazin (2011), " The North East – Towards Economic Resurgence", *Kurukshetra,* Vol 61. No 1. November

Sabatier, Paul A (1986), "Top-down and Bottom-up Approaches to Implementation Research: A Critical Analysis and Suggested Synthesis." *Journal of Public Policy*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1986, pp. 21–48. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3998354.

Singh, Thiyam Bhagat (2007), "Poverty in Manipur" *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42

Tandon, BB and Garg, A (2009), "Inclusivity and Sustainable Development", *Indian Journal of Public Administration,* 59(4)

UDCRMS (1999-2008), *Status Report*, Ukhrul: Manipur

Venkatachalam,L (2011), "Hidden Failures of 'Successful Institutions': Community Management of CRPs", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 66(29)

WCD, (2018), *www.wcd.nic.in* accessed on 14th September, 2018