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Decentralized Agricultural Planning through Panchayats of Kerala- Constraints and Policy Imperatives

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ABSTRACT

In Kerala local governments have been transformed as effective instruments for formulating and implementing development programmes through people's participation. Though devolution of fund has been carried out through a formula based, non-discretionary and equitable manner, the efficacy of planning process at grass roots have assumed varied levels of performance due to several constraints. The study was conducted in 160 working group members of 40 Panchayats of five agroclimatic zones of Kerala. Various Constraints were ranked based on severity scores and then tested with Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance. There was high degree of concordance among the respondents to rank the main constraints as poor marketing infrastructure, weak coordination among sectoral working groups, lack of convergence among departments, less propagation of technologies in projects, less expertise of working group members and less farmer participation in planning. Policy support for enhancing people's participation, technology backstopping of LSGIs to enhance quality of projects, capacity building of working groups and Panchayath Planning committees, promotion of agricultural enterprises and marketing initiatives, resurgence of traditional markets, data base support to local planning and scaling up of integrated projects has been suggested.

Key words: Decentralized planning, Agricultural development, Constraints, Policy imperatives

In Kerala local governments have been transformed as effective instruments for formulating and implementing development programmes through people's participation. They are meaningfully empowered to discharge such functions through strategic devolution of functions, functionaries and funds. This decentralized planning process through local self-governments has been quite unique because of three aspects – financial devolution, plan formulation and implementation, and extent of people's participation. Though devolution of fund has been carried out through a formula based, non-discretionary and equitable manner, the efficacy of planning process at grass roots have assumed varied levels of performance due to several constraints.

Some constraints such as political interference in beneficiary selection process, mis utilization of funds, lack of technical advice, meetings at inconvenient time and place, inadequate training and delay in implementing the programme were attributed to participation of women office bearers in people's planning campaign [1]. Often elected representatives, in fear of criticism of voters in gram Sabha,

resorted to ward level division of projects, undermining the rationality in planning. There were instances of data base limiting appropriate formulation of strategies.

Reflecting on the changes in the procedure of decentralized planning in Kerala over a period of time, Sudhakaran [2] observed that the task forces for local planning, which was an innovation of the people's plan campaign had been given only less significance in the second phase of the campaign. The participation of all categories of members in the task forces/working groups had also declined in the second sub-period compared to the first. Aiyar [3] observed that the institutionalized spaces for participation and accountability created by the 73rd amendment could not implicitly result in participation by citizens and the establishment of an accountable system, which called for a number of institutional reforms to facilitate meaningful participation. While analyzing the participatory planning experiences in Kerala, Vijayanand [4] observed a local passivity that had crept into the process and the need to revamp the procedures to make planning more participatory. Participation of the people would take place only when there were efficient democratic structures for facilitating participation. Hinting on institutional reforms, Kumar [5] emphasized the need to improve the efficiency of project identification, selection of projects, identification of beneficiaries and decision making by Grama Panchayats.

Some studies have hinted a bureaucratic capture of the decentralized planning process with frequent orders and

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guidelines from above subduing the process. Without compromising on responsiveness to people and accountability, expertise has to be inculcated. At the same time, participation of people cannot be a substitute for expertise in planning at the grass roots [6]. But many constrains have been reported hindering participation and performance of farmers in working groups at panchayath level for participatory planning [7]. Participation of people over the years have been declining, while only poor and lower sections of the middle class appreciating the empowering potential of the gram Sabha [8]. There is a need to strengthen Gram Sabha to a functional institution with strict follow up for its decisions [9].

In spite of many institutionalized frameworks for participatory planning, several bottle necks related to local governance and farmer capacity affect farmer participation

and process efficacy. Hence an attempt has been made to derive the core of problems from this study on constraints and policy imperatives for participatory farmer development approaches. It would help evolve strategies for better institutionalization of grassroots level planning in agriculture.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

The study was conducted selected districts of five agroclimatic zones of Kerala such as Thiruvananthapuram (Northern Kerala), Palakkad (central zone), Malappuram (Northern Kerala), Wayanad (High range zone) and Thrissur (Problem Area Zone). Forty panchayats were selected based on cropping intensity. A brief profile of the study area has been given in (Table 1).

Table 1 Profile of the study area five districts – an overview

Parameter	Thiruvananthapuram	Thrissur	Palakkad	Malappuram	Wayanad
Area (Km ²)	2192	3032	4480	3550	2131
Forest cover (Km ²)	1304	1159	2084	1981	1580
Population 2011 (in Lakh)	33.01	31.21	28.1	41.13	8.17
Density	1508	1031	627	1157	384
SC population as % of total population	11.3	10.4	14.4	7.5	4.0
ST population as % of total population	0.8	0.3	1.7	0.6	18.5
Production of rice in Kerala (2019-20) in tonnes (Wetland)	4541	76556	248199.0	28214	19513
Net area irrigated (2019-20) in ha	7842	62227	86026	29528	12186
No. of registered SSI/MSME 2019-20	1363	1594	1694	1177	264
No. of Gram Panchayaths	73	86	88	94	23

Study sample

Stratified random sampling procedure was followed for the purpose of drawing sample for the study. One district each was randomly selected from each of the five agro climatic zones of Kerala. From each district eight Panchayaths with high cropping intensity were selected. The sample of respondents comprised of 40 Agricultural Officers, 40 Grama Panchayat Presidents and 80 farmers who are members of the agricultural working group at Panchayat level constituted for participatory planning. The total sample size thus was 160.

In the present study, constraint was operationalized as a problem experienced by members of working group hindering them from effectively participating in participatory planning process. In order to identify severity of various constraints encountered the following procedure was adopted.

A list of possible constraints that may hinder the participation in participatory planning process was prepared from the information available from different sources such as researchers in the area, interviews with working group members and officials, brainstorming, focused group discussions, expert interactions and review of literature. After that a pilot study was conducted among 50 non sample farmers of the study area to identify the constraints experienced by them, where in the prepared list of constraints was used as a check list. Necessary modifications were made in the list of constraints, more constraints were added, and important constraints were identified during the pilot study.

The selected constraints were presented in the final interview schedule and the sample farmers were asked to rate them based on their severity and importance on a five-point continuum of most important, important, undecided, less

important and least important with scores of 5,4,3,2 and 1 respectively. The scores obtained for each constraint based on the responses of all the respondents were summed up and divided by the total number of respondents to get the severity score of each constraint. Then based on the severity scores, the constraints were ranked.

Kendall’s W statistic, called the Coefficient of Concordance was used to assess the agreement between different raters on the constraints listed. Kendall’s W statistic ranges from 0 to 1. A value of zero shows there is absolutely no agreement between raters, while 1 shows perfect agreement. The higher the value of Kendall’s W, the stronger is the association. Usually, Kendall’s coefficients of 0.9 or higher are considered very good.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result of the statistical analysis has been given in (Table 2). Here the value obtained for coefficient of concordance was 0.657 and the test statistic was significant. There was high degree of concordance among the respondents to rank the main constraints as poor marketing infrastructure, weak coordination among sectoral working groups ,lack of convergence among departments ,less propagation of technologies in projects, less expertise of working group members, less farmer participation in planning, project preparation as official job, weak service provider network for farmers, lack of reliable local data base for planning, poor technical support base, poor mobilization of local resources and lack of participation opportunity in planning [10-14].

Constraints like lack of participation opportunity in planning, Grama Sabha priority toppled, unawareness of

project objectives, lack of adequate publicity for Gram Sabha, guidelines restricting innovative program initiatives, dual control of officials limiting performance, no annual accounts presented in Grama Sabha, untimely funds and delayed implementation, unaware of Grama Sabha rights, less transparency in planning process and biased beneficiary

selection process received comparatively lesser ranks indicating that these dimensions pertaining to the efficacy of institutionalization of decentralized planning have been addressed to a relatively better satisfaction of the actors of the process.

Table 2 Constraint analysis of the decentralized planning process in Local Self Government Institutions LSGIs of Kerala

S. No.	Name of constraint	Mean rank	Ratio	Mean value	Standard deviation
1	Poor marketing infrastructure	18.98	99.75	4.99	0.11145
2	weak coordination among sectoral working groups	18.18	97.75	4.89	0.38831
3	Lack of convergence among departments	18.02	97.37	4.87	0.33873
4	Less propagation of technologies in projects	17.13	94.75	4.74	0.61927
5	Less expertise of working group members	16.91	94.5	4.73	0.44792
6	Less farmer participation in planning	16.91	94.5	4.73	0.44792
7	Project preparation as official job	16.16	92.37	4.62	0.54797
8	Weak service provider network for farmers	12.04	81.75	4.09	0.46767
9	Lack of reliable local data base for planning	11.33	78.38	3.99	0.45553
10	Poor technical support base	11.2	73.25	3.97	0.50094
11	Poor mobilization of local resources	11.16	76.87	3.96	0.70351
12	Lack of participation opportunity in planning	11.13	79.13	3.96	0.54191
13	Gram Sabha priority toppled	11.06	76.38	3.96	0.37904
14	Unaware of project objectives	10.88	78.75	3.94	0.48483
15	Lack of adequate publicity for Gram Sabha	9.8	75	3.75	0.6143
16	Guidelines restricting innovative program initiatives	9.24	74.12	3.71	0.48366
17	Dual control limiting performance	8.68	72	3.6	0.60605
18	No annual accounts in Grama Sabha	7.68	66.25	3.31	1.01676
19	untimely funds and delayed implementation	5.34	60.12	3.02	0.73968
20	Unaware of Grama Sabha rights	4.79	59.6	2.98	0.5197
21	less transparency in planning process	4.52	57.63	2.88	0.57595
22	Biased beneficiary selection process	1.88	40.75	2.04	0.58156
	Test Statistics				
	N	160			
	Kendall's W ^a	.657			
	Chi-Square	2208.462			
	df	21			
	Asymp. Sig.	0.000			
	a. Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance				

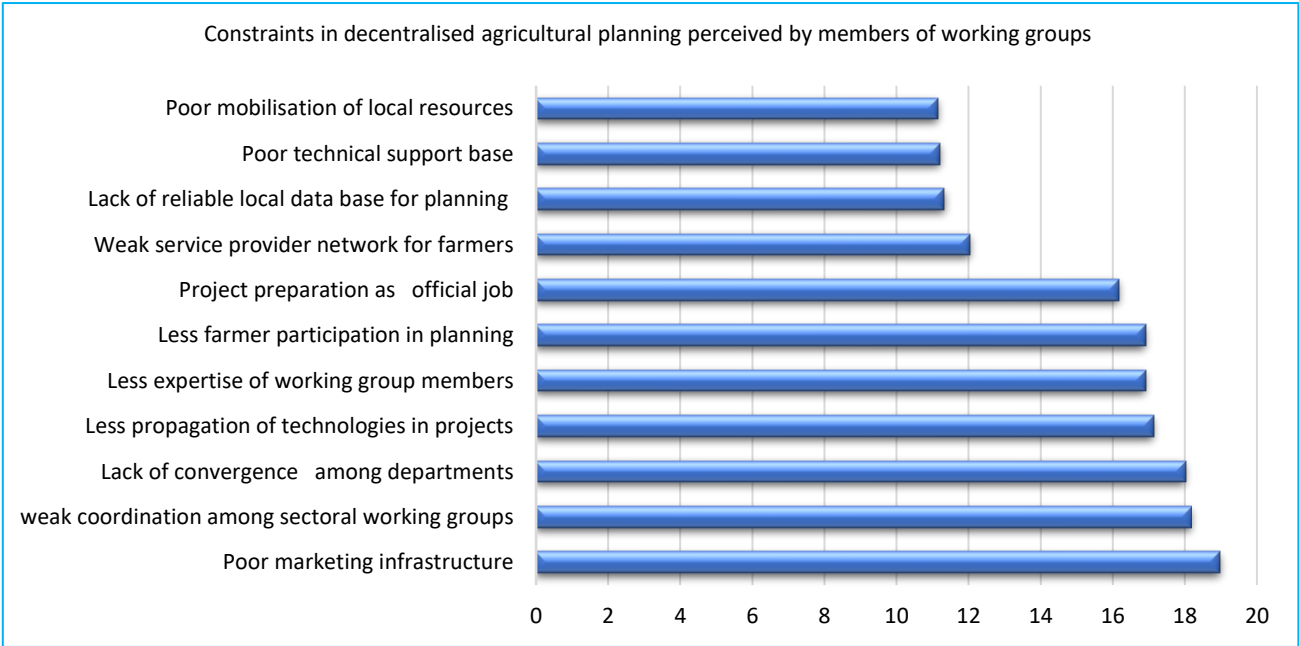


Fig 1 Constraints in decentralized agricultural planning perceived by members of working groups

Policy imperatives

In the light of the above constraints, to enhance the efficiency of the service delivery and efficacy of the process, some policy imperatives will hold good.

1. To enhance people's participation

Planning committees as an institutional innovation supporting decentralized planning were formed in all the LGs to help them in plan formulation, implementation, and monitoring, ensuring participation of volunteers and experts. The institutional structures in panchayath such as working group and Panchayath Planning Committee should conduct maximum stakeholder consultations on a campaign mode before Grama Sabha. Consequent to online project formulation and uploading, unlike in earlier plan periods, farmers have no visible roles in project formulations. Hence implementing officers and panchayath Planning Committee should conduct maximum farmer consultations to formulate project proposals linking Farmer Interest Groups and FPOs. Use of the Gram Sabha portal to receive the views of public also should be encouraged.

2. Technology backstopping of LSGIs to enhance quality of projects

Technological backstopping of the agricultural planning process is quite necessary for the sustainability of the initiatives. Apart from the distribution of manures, fertilizers, seeds, irrigation pump sets and incentives towards labour cost, projects scaling up innovations in farming and improved varieties are meagre and badly lacking. KVKs should actively support decentralized planning initiatives of local self-governments of the district.

3. Capacity building of working groups and PPCs

Central research stations and State Agricultural Universities and KVKs should strategically backstop the working groups and Panchayath Planning Committees constituted at Panchayat level through focused capacity building initiatives for getting their technologies projectized. This will address the issues of less expertise of working group members. While nominating members to the working group, the local body should give priority for innovative farmers having integrated farming system, with proven track records.

4. Promotion of agricultural enterprises and marketing initiatives

Weekly markets may be established at Grama Panchayat level. Besides, a chain of agro super bazars and eco shops can also be facilitated. Creating an E-portal and linking farmer collectives with states following GAP can also be taken up. Efforts may be made for the required software development networking for the effective management of the portal.

5. Resurgence of traditional markets

The perception of poor marketing infrastructure was the most ranked among various constraints analyzed. Though development of rural market infrastructure is a mandatory function of the local government, compared to other sectors of agriculture, there are meagre initiatives for the development of markets and supporting networks.

6. Data base support to local planning

The panchayath level data base for planning has to be updated through massive farmer participation. The Peoples' Bio Diversity Register formulated through Bio Diversity Management Committees and the watershed master plan have to be updated. This will foster the opportunities for local resource mobilization.

7. Projects to abridge skill gaps in farming

Agriculture in Kerala villages have low extent of farm mechanization and non-availability of skilled labour adversely affects crop production. For improved service delivery, the existing Agro service centres (ASC) at block level and Farmer Service Centres should be networked for mechanization, labour support, bio pharmacy and planting materials, soil testing support and other technology based services. The service delivery to farmers for farm mechanization, crop management, crop protection and marketing has to be institutionalized through supporting projects from decentralized plan allocations.

8. Promoting traditional wisdom

Traditional wisdom is quite vital at grass roots for offering climate resilience. In this context, conservation of traditional varieties and climate related indigenous knowledge with active participation of local farming community has been the need of the hour. Assistance for cultivation and multiplication of local germplasm, traditional seed reserves by local farmer clusters, community seed banks and seed growers' networks have to be initiated and the subsidies have to be broadened to include such initiatives.

9. Integration of projects

Compared to the advantage decentralized initiatives have in ensuring forward and backward linkages, due to weak coordination among sectoral working groups, integrated projects are not properly formulated. Before plan formulation in the development seminar, the Panchayath Planning Committee should ensure that the working groups collectively discuss their sectoral reports for developing shared vision. This will foster convergence among the functions of various officials transferred to the Grama panchayath.

CONCLUSION

In spite of many administrative reforms supporting participatory planning, several hurdles related to local governance and farmer capacity affect farmer participation and process efficacy. Interventions addressing poor marketing infrastructure, weak coordination among sectoral working groups, lack of convergence among departments, less propagation of technologies in projects, less expertise of working group members, less farmer participation in planning, domination of officials in project preparation, weak service provider network for farmers, lack of reliable local data base for planning, poor technical support base, poor mobilization of local resources are some of the inevitable strategies for better institutionalization of grassroots level planning in agriculture.

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