

**LESSONS LEARNED ON DECENTRALISATION:  
A LITERATURE REVIEW**

**SUMMARY OF LESSONS ON THE ROLE OF DONOR AGENCIES, CIVIL  
SOCIETY, AND NGOs**

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A factor consistently identified in the decentralisation literature as being important is the role played by civil society actors, donor agencies and NGOs.

Several key themes may be drawn from the decentralisation literature with regard to the influence of donor agencies, civil society and NGOs on decentralisation processes. The themes are

- Capacity building
- Coordination
- Ownership

These key themes speak to the fundamental challenges to those engaged in supporting decentralisation processes and address issues such as accountability, efficiency, legitimacy and sustainability.

### **What do we mean by the concept of CAPACITY BUILDING?**

The concept of capacity building was developed during the 1990s as a response to the growing realisation that poverty and sustainable development could not be addressed through technical and economic solutions alone.

The United Nations Development Program defines capacity development as "the process by which individuals, groups, organizations, institutions and societies increase their abilities to: 1) perform core functions, solve problems, define and achieve objectives; and 2) understand and deal with their development needs in a broad context and in a sustainable manner." <sup>1</sup>

Capacity building is an approach to development that uses resources for the purpose of investing in human and social capital that will allow human resources to be more effectively used to achieve the development objectives. Therefore, an investment in capacity building it is intended as an investment in future, long term and sustainable benefits. Donors can play a key role in capacity building, thus ensuring the sustainability of their efforts.

### **What do we mean by the concept of COORDINATION?**

There are many actors involved in implementing a decentralisation programme including the central government, the central ministries, local government, donor agencies, local and international NGOs, civil society actors and private interests. The quest for and achievement, among these actors, of a broad political and social consensus for a decentralisation policy is essential for its success. One can think of different possibilities in order to realise such a consensus such as extensive bilateral consultation between donors and local partners. On a national level, a national

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP, 1997. "Capacity Development", Technical Advisory Paper II. In: Capacity Development Resource Book. Management Development and Governance Division. UNDP.

conference on decentralisation bringing together the main representatives of the various state levels and public sectors might facilitate communication and the development of a consensus position. Coordination is also required throughout the decentralisation process so that the activities of the various actors are complementary and mutually reinforcing, rather than being repetitive and in competition with each other. For donors coordination is key because, although the creation of multiple partnerships is recommended, it is a bigger challenge in terms of coordination.

### **What do we mean by the concept of OWNERSHIP?**

One of the main advantages of decentralisation is that it brings government closer to the people, both in terms of their input (participation in the political process) and the output (provision of services) they receive. However, this advantage is not realised when the local community does not feel a sense of ownership of the local government and its projects in the local community. Too often local development projects are thought to serve the interests of the members of the local government (often the local elite) or of outside interests, such as those of donor agencies, regardless of how well motivated these two groups may be. This can be the case as well with decentralisation programmes that are often initiated at the behest of international organisations and implemented by the central government in a top-down fashion. There are several ways to encourage feelings of ownership, the most important probably being to listen to the members of the local community. Thus extensive consultation both during planning and implementation phases is essential to the success of decentralisation programmes.

The following lessons from the report Lessons Learned on Decentralisation address in a general fashion the three themes mentioned here (capacity building, ownership and coordination) and the roles played by donors, NGOs and civil society with regard to these themes. The lessons here, while informative and valuable, do not paint a comprehensive picture of the roles of these actors. Thus, further study on this subject is recommended.

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**Donor Lessons:**

*Reducing decentralisation to a technical and administrative procedure leads to an underestimation of the political aspects that invariably remain important in a decentralisation process.*

Decentralisation processes, at least in their initial stage, are often dominated by civil servants rather than elected politicians. This may be explained by the greater administrative and technical competence that civil servants often enjoy over politicians. This leads to decentralisation being presented as a technical rather than a political matter. This tendency can also be observed in donor agencies

**Case Study:**

The decentralisation of the health sector in **Uganda** illustrates how and why a technical measure such as a change in the human resource management can turn into a highly political question: The transfer of staff ‘hiring and firing’ decisions to the district governments through the district service commission was considered to be one of the cornerstones of decentralisation. However, not all staff members were put under this system. Hospital workers, for instance, continued to be paid directly through direct transfers from the Ministry of Finance. These centrally paid hospital workers were more likely to receive their full salaries on time, while locally hired staff would go for months or even years without being paid. As Bossert noted: “There are significant equity and quality issues associated with changes in human resource management. As the management of human resource system is no longer nationally unified, district health professionals no longer have the same geographic mobility and access to promotion, making it significantly more difficult for poorer, rural districts to attract qualified personnel. Different levels of resources and prioritisation of the health sector tend to lead to non-uniformity in the training and capacity of district health personnel” (Bossert, Beauvais, and Bowser 2000: 45) Often such measures can not be avoided, therefore the greater need for governments and donors to invest in training and institutional development.

*Effective and operational decentralisation requires an improvement in fiscal management and a stronger financial capacity at the regional and/or local level. The donors can provide the required management tools (know how).*

Effective decision-making and policy implementation at the regional or local level requires a strong degree of financial autonomy of the sub-national units. This autonomy can only be achieved and sustained if the decentralised units have the capacities to generate enough financial resources and are able to manage them properly. Experiences in developing countries show that these management and financial capacities can often not be taken for granted. There is therefore in most cases a strong need for managerial and administrative capacity building at subnational levels of government.

**Case Study :**

The Regional Urban Development Program in **Thailand** was a success as far as capacity building is concerned. An important component of this programme was precisely to improve the financial capacities and financial management skills at the

provincial and municipal level. The key features of this programme were: the introduction of a range of financial capacity enhancement measures at the municipal level with an annotated set of criteria for their application; a programme of recommended practices for municipal revenue collection, including guidelines and manuals for the application of the various financial capacity enhancement measures; a set of need- and performance-based criteria for establishing the municipal share of various central grant funds; an operational and replicable system for property registration and valuation using tax-mapping techniques as well as the training of trainers in the application of the system (Ta'i 2000: 406-407). The evaluation of the programme during the last month of its implementation found that despite numerous constraints a number of tangible programme objectives had been achieved. The success of the programme is ascribed to its 'process approach' that does not fix all the details of implementation but sets general objectives and agrees on a broad framework. This allows constantly reviewing of the programme's direction and for the necessary adjustment according to the needs and priorities of the programme.

*The advantages of infrastructural development at the local level are invariably only realised over the medium to long term. Donors should therefore carefully assess the timeframe of their projects.*

The decentralisation of road administration in some developing countries has not produced the expected advantages (such as the improvement of rural transportation services) due to implementation problems. These implementation problems include insufficient financing and lack of management ability, both of which may be improved with long-term capacity building.

*The quality and efficiency of service delivery in local or regional areas can be improved significantly through a statistics service gathering data and producing demographic status analysis.*

In order to identify gaps or failures in service delivery, an administration must be able to rely on adequate data. Objective measures to control and evaluate the effectiveness of public services are produced by statistical services that collect demographic data to significant degrees of disaggregation. Such statistic services are generally underdeveloped in developing countries. In these conditions it becomes very difficult to know how many people have access to primary health care, how many square meters of tarred road have been laid, or what percentage of a household's income is spent on food, transport, health, etc. This is an area where donors can provide expertise in the short term, and capacity building in the long term.

### **Case Study:**

In order to meet local data requirements, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) employed two approaches in **India**. On the one hand the UN country office has relied on assistant nurse midwives who, during their regular visits to the communities are able to obtain information according to categories prepared by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The other approach has been less formalised and has consisted of community workshops at the district level. Secondary information from official records and other documents allows the data sets to be

completed. Methods such as field visits, interviews, and group discussions are applied in order to obtain information at the grassroots level about regional health status and needs regarding fertility, as well as organisational capacity and the extent of group activity in the communities. At the same time the communities are made aware of the nature of the programme, and their participation has been encouraged in discussions during the formulation of the project (Sherry-Cloonan et al. 2000).

**Botswana** enjoys a well-developed statistical service. This has resulted in Botswana's HIV/AIDS infection rate appearing to be higher than that of its neighbours. In fact countries like Lesotho or Swaziland probably have similar or even higher infection rates, but the inadequate state of the incidence data that emanate from those countries obscure this comparable relationship. The high quality of statistical data in Botswana have allowed the government to design appropriate policies to deal with the disease in that country, such as 'home based care', etc.

Bossert et.al (2000) argue along the same lines when they point out that although some reports mention that the quality of care in hospitals has deteriorated in the **Philippines** and others health services have improved, this remains anecdotal because no systematic data are available. Furthermore they observes that in areas with low disease incidence indicators, government has been able to shift resources away from health towards other sectors, whereas the reverse has occurred in areas with high disease incidence indicators or poor overall data (Bossert, Beauvais, and Bowser 2000).

*In order to ensure the quality of services delivered at the local level, local service providers must have access to a comprehensive support system in order to implement national strategies.*

For effective implementation of a decentralisation process, the central level of administration must allocate sufficient resources in terms of financial and human capital, technical assistance and skills-upgrade training programs. When a decentralisation process is implemented without adequate technical and training support from the central administration, inexperienced local administrative staff are left to fend for themselves. The result is that the quality of services delivered will suffer. However, there are alternatives to this support being provided from the central administration. Aid agencies can play a role in ensuring quality services by providing expertise and training.

### **Case Study:**

**Nicaragua** has introduced the Decentralised Health Services Project. The objective of this project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is to reduce infant and maternal mortality rates by implementing a comprehensive package of integrated maternal and child health (MCH) services. The MCH project is quite significant in scope with MCH services being developed in four of Nicaragua's seventeen districts, in which about 40% of the country's population resides. A key component of the MCH services project involves providing help to the districts in the development and implementation of a strengthened management information and financial administration system. This component of the project is facilitated with assistance from an organisation called Management Science for Health (MSH). MSH is a private, non-profit educational and scientific organisation

devoted to improving the management of and access to health services. In the context of Nicaragua's MCH program, MSH provides technical assistance and training services (such as management and leadership skills). At the central level five international experts work in the Ministry of Health in the areas of MCH, management information systems, financial management, training and health economics. In addition, five Nicaraguan experts work as extension agents in the four districts. These experts provide continuous support to the implementation of the decentralised MCH program. The Nicaraguan example indicates that, in the context of reducing infant and maternal mortality, decentralising the health system can be effective if it is designed and carried out in a comprehensive manner which focuses on all aspects of the sector, including management and information (UNDP Decentralization Program 1998).

*The capacity to coordinate the different public and private actors as well as the various donors involved in decentralisation projects and the ability of the state to mediate and resolve conflicts among these actors appears to be an essential aspect for the success of decentralisation and represent a new form of authority and therefore also political power.*

Decentralisation has often been seen as a threat to the central state since it is accompanied by a loss of authority from the central state to the subnational levels. However the literature on decentralisation reveals that by losing 'top-down' authority the state can acquire a new kind of power fundamental for the success of decentralisation policies. This power is related to its potential role as coordinating agent for the various donor agencies and NGOs operating within the state.

*Donor influence on the institutional design in the decentralisation process risks blurring the borderline between the public and the private, and undermines the formal authority of local government.*

Donors usually tend to apply performance-based management regimes to their beneficiaries. Apart from the many positive aspects of such systems, problems can occur which are hardly foreseeable or controllable. Private or non-governmental actors dispose of more resources than public institutions. Private actors can therefore influence decisions to the extent that they no longer correspond to the public and democratic decision-making process.

### **Case Study:**

In the case of primary education in **Tanzania**, Therkildsen mentions the World Bank, the European Community and other donor countries' efforts to transform government grants to local authorities into block grants to district councils. This gives the councils greater authority in decision making about primary schools (Therkildsen 2000). The donors also suggested that the employment of teachers should be shifted from the Teachers Service Commission to the District Councils, in order to give parents a more active part in the running of schools. Donor investments are conditional on improvements in school infrastructure, a situation that encouraged a level of competition between regions that compromised inter-regional equity. In Tanzania it has been observed, that if the parliament is substantively involved in the process of

law making it helps to ensure the commitment of politicians to the rule of law. This is rarely the case if such a framework is designed and interpreted by donor agencies.

*A sense of ownership must be created before the local population will feel motivated to participate in decentralised local government and to support its development projects.*

Decentralised governance allows for the possibility of local community involvement in the planning and implementation of development projects. However, this involvement will not take place unless the local community feel that the project is in their interests. The local community is not likely to feel ownership of a project that it perceives is motivated by the objectives and agendas of outside parties, such as donor agencies.

*Evaluation and Monitoring must be an integrative part of every decentralisation programme.*

Public policies need constant adjustment and fine-tuning in order to be effective. The assumption that good planning alone is sufficient for successful implementation has been proven wrong more than once in developed as well as in developing countries. Monitoring and evaluation of decentralisation programmes contribute to minimise the gap between what has been planned and what is really implemented. This improves, over the long term, the quality of decentralisation processes.

### **Lessons Relating to Civil Society, NGOs and Traditional Authorities:**

*Central government and donors supporting decentralisation should facilitate civil society input in establishing local government performance standards and holding local governments accountable to provide quality services.*

Particularly in newly democratic and decentralised systems, civil society and governments must work together in order to create a system capable of efficiently delivering quality services. This involves providing opportunities for members of local assemblies to improve their skills, as many may be inexperienced in government. It is also important to provide opportunities for dialogue between members of local government and central government so that both are aware of their responsibilities and may therefore operate in a more efficient manner. Civil society also has a role to play in monitoring government performance and aggregating and articulating citizen preferences. Such a holistic approach is essential for ensuring quality local services, especially in new democracies.

### **Case Study:**

Local governments in newly decentralised **Indonesia** face many challenges in providing quality services to their constituents. Overcoming these challenges requires co-operation between many groups. For example, newly elected members of local governments are unskilled in performing government tasks (such as constructing



budgets and drafting public policies) and may not be fully aware of their duties and responsibilities as representatives of their communities. Steps are being taken to address these issues. In the Municipality of Sukabumi, the local assembly has encouraged its members to attend training sessions and seek various forms of further education. However, as Syaikhu Usman writes, improving the technical capacity and general knowledge of elected legislators alone is not a guarantee of the smooth functioning of the new system. It is also important that the community, and actors such as the local press, political parties and interest groups become involved in monitoring government performance (Usman 2002). In post-autocratic societies both these actors and individual citizens will be unaccustomed to holding the government accountable for providing them with quality services. This new responsibility of civil society to hold the government to account can be assisted in its development by support from the central government and donors who encourage a holistic approach to ensuring quality service design and delivery.

*National government institutions as well as organs representing civil society might be relied upon to monitor the implementation of a decentralisation process and the conduct of the decentralised institutions of government.*

A decentralisation process will involve many government ministries, both those whose actual functions are decentralised and those providing support to local governments. Co-ordination between these various ministries can be facilitated by their participation on oversight committees. An oversight committee can address specific problems and challenges encountered throughout the decentralisation process from an inter-agency perspective. Similarly, oversight committees may be established for local civil society representatives. These can make inputs into the local policy-making process, and can monitor the performance of local authorities.

### **Case Study:**

The **Philippines** has formed such an interagency oversight committee to facilitate its decentralisation process. The purpose of this committee is to support the implementation of the Philippines' Local Government Code of 1991. The members of the committee include representatives from the local government units, the Department of Finance's Bureau of Local Government Finance, the Department of Budget and Management and the Department of the Interior and Local Government. The committee addresses issues such as local finance and fiscal administration, local legislation, the relationship between local government units and NGOs and personnel administration. The role of the committee changed somewhat in 1995 when the oversight committee created what "transition actions teams". These teams act at the regional and provincial level to facilitate the resolution of decentralisation issues. Now only those issues that cannot be settled locally by the transition actions teams are brought to the national oversight committee (Brillantes Jr. 2002).

The administrations of local authorities can also be structured in a manner that allows for more popular oversight. In terms of the **Bolivian** Law of Popular Participation of 1994, each municipality must establish a Vigilance Committee (CV). CV members are elected from neighbourhoods or rural community associations and communicate their constituent's preferences to the municipal authorities (Rowland 2001:1380).

*Non-governmental organisations can play an important role in democratic decentralisation. The role played by NGOs can have positive effects on the overall democratisation process, but NGOs should none the less be relied upon with caution.*

In recent years increasing faith was placed in NGO's and other actors of civil society as a motive factor for democratisation at the grassroots level and bottom-up development. Recent studies tend to temper this idealistic view in arguing that corruption, undemocratic decision-making, inequalities and representation problems are not only a problem of political authorities but are also likely to occur in civil society. Therefore, donors should recognise the importance of diversifying their decentralisation strategies and carefully evaluating a partner's capacity and credibility when financial and technical co-operation is involved.

#### **Case Study:**

In the case of **Bangladesh**, donors have increasingly channelled development aid through non-governmental organisations, partly in response to the perception of the central government as malfunctioning and ineffective. Donors believe that NGOs (rather than the government) are likely to initiate a process of democratisation (Westergaard 2000). Since the fall of the Ershad regime and the return of a system of democratic and parliamentary government in 1991 there have been two sets of local council (union *parishad*) elections. In both elections some NGO groups have helped to mobilise groups of poor citizens to fight for their economic, political and human rights. Specifically, NGOs helped such groups select candidates to run in the local elections, some of who were successful. According to Kirsten Westergaard, the area where NGOs have had the greatest impact in rural Bangladesh has been on gender issues. This is illustrated by, among other things, the great number of women from NGO groups who were elected to union *parishads* in 1997. However, Westergaard also cautions against the promotion of NGOs as the primary actors in furthering democratisation. There is a danger of the rural poor becoming dependent on NGOs, organisations that are accountable not to them, but to donors (Westergaard 2000). While NGOs may enhance the democratic participation of rural poor in local government institutions, they are not the organs that will be able to make the structural changes required to more fully implement a democratic system at both the national and local levels. This is something that must be done by governments.

*Local government is not the only agent of development; civil society and NGOs have in many cases initiated their own development projects. However, no private agency should be a substitute for local government as the primary development agency. Better coordination in this domain is crucial.*

In some cases the inadequacies of central government, or the collapse of local service delivery, have led to situations where non-governmental agencies have taken over development and service responsibilities. Even if such a development is understandable, it cannot be desirable, since neither civil societies nor NGOs are a guarantee for democratic procedures and accountable structures.

#### **Case Study:**

In Northern **Ghana**, civil society support has been strongly of the service-delivery type in which charity, and bilateral and multilateral aid is channelled through NGOs in order to support welfare programmes and micro-scale entrepreneurship. Earlier

work on local government shows that one of the key problems at the level of programme delivery is that NGOs have tended to set up parallel systems alongside a weak and under-funded local government system (Mohan 2002).

In **Senegal** NGOs participate in the delivery of education at the local level. However, this assistance is not subject to the normal democratic controls that otherwise apply to local government (Chabal and Daloz 1999:23). Chabal and Daloz mention an NGO in Senegal that imported tax-free computers for use by schools and re-sold these for a commercial profit.

*Decentralisation multiplies the number of institutions involved in the planning, decision-making and implementation of public policies. The composition of these bodies is a sensitive issue and a potential source of conflict.*

The conflicts within representative institutions at all levels of government are often rooted in the nomination procedures that apply to these bodies. There are basically two procedures for composing decentralised bodies: by election or by appointment. Appointed members of political bodies tend to practice upward accountability, while elected members practice a downward oriented accountability. The legitimacy is in either case different. Political bodies often contain both types of members, appointed ones and elected ones. In several cases representatives from NGO groups or traditional leaders are granted places on local councils. The potential for conflicts in such 'mixed' bodies is much higher than in homogeneously composed bodies. Nevertheless homogeneity is not a guarantee for success either.

*One way to improve accountability may be the establishment of citizen committees to review the performance of local government.*

Where traditional instruments of ensuring accountability such as opposition parties, regular elections, a wide-ranging and accessible media, are inadequate or even non-existent, citizen review committees can supplement the accountability process at local government level. In addition, citizen review committees might also be established simply to augment the traditional instruments of accountability even where these do already exist.

### **Case Study:**

One of the components of **Bolivia's** decentralisation process was the creation of "Vigilance Committees" (Comité de vigilancia, CV). The CVs are created at each municipal level and are elected directly by the Base Territorial Organisation (or BTO, a traditional, often indigenous, type of social organisation recognised by the decentralisation process under the Law of Popular Participation of 1994). The principle function of the CV is to ensure an effective relationship between the BTO and the municipal government, and well as to exercise some control over the municipal authorities, including the municipal legislative body. The CV has a right to consult and formulate proposals for the municipal budget, to control the use of municipal financial resources and to notify national or departmental authorities if cases of corruption or bad management become apparent at the municipal government. In spite of implementation problems with some of the CVs, it can generally be confirmed that the institutions created by the Law of Popular

Participation allow the civilian population to direct municipal budgetary choices and give priority to projects that were in the interest of the community (Thévoz).

**Uganda** has improved the accountability of local government through a number of institutions. These include the Local Government Tender Board, a Local Government Public Accounts Committee, and a Local Government Auditor. These institutions have been effective in detecting corruption in the system and the local council is closely involved in their operations (Bossert, Beauvais, and Bowser 2000).

*The maximization of direct participation in even complex government undertakings is possible, and can ensure better public service outputs, if certain basic preconditions are met.*

It is not a general lack of interest among local users of the education system that accounts for their passive role in local decision making, instead it is an absence of institutional arrangements for participation that limits their involvement. Moreover, often participation in the appropriate local institutions depends on formal party membership individual responses to the crisis in primary education are likely to continue. Institutional arrangements must therefore be developed to encourage stakeholders with a direct interest in primary education to pursue more collective engagements to ensure improvements in primary education for their children.

*Indigenous non-governmental organisations can play an important role in facilitating the participation of poor and marginalized groups in the political system.*

The existence of democratic institutions is often insufficient to ensure that all individuals and groups in society will have the necessary resources and expertise to engage in the political system. Non-governmental organisations can assist by supporting poor and marginalized groups in their advocacy activities, and by helping these groups to establish links between themselves and thus to assist each other through co-operation.

Decentralisation of government powers to traditional or existing local government institutions may give the decentralisation process a more legitimate basis, where the population views these existing institutions positively.

### **Case Study:**

In **Bangladesh** NGOs have been acting to improve the accessibility of local political institutions and the ability of poor and women's groups to participate in local decision making. By reaching out directly to the poor and mobilising them for group action, NGOs have reduced dependence on local elites, and have created solidarity by fostering horizontal links between groups representing the poor. Since the return to democratic and parliamentary government in 1991 there have been two sets of local council (union *parishad*) elections. In both elections NGO groups have helped to mobilise groups of poor citizens to fight for their economic, political and human rights. More specifically, NGOs have helped such groups to select candidates to run in the local elections. According to Kirsten Westergaard, who has conducted extensive research on the topic of local government and NGOs in Bangladesh, the area where NGOs have had the greatest impact in rural Bangladesh has been on gender issues. This is illustrated by, among other things, the number of women from

NGO groups that were elected to union *parishads* in 1997 (Westergaard 2000). Though finding that NGO mobilisation had only a minimal effect on the ability of marginalized groups to influence the political agenda, Crook and Manor do point out that in areas where NGOs have not been active, they were able to find *no* evidence of “concerted action” by marginalized groups (Crook and Manor 1998).

*While consideration must be given to social and cultural idiosyncrasies in developing states, the formal incorporation of traditional authorities into democratic structures remains a vexing issue.*

The incorporation of traditional forms of authority, representation and legitimacy may be essential to ensuring the participation of those citizens that submit to, or fall under, such traditional authorities. However, traditional forms of authority are, more often than not, incompatible with the structures, processes and values of modern liberal democracy. The evidence indicates that at best, traditional authorities can be brought into the process of government in a consulting or advisory capacity.

*It is important to institutionalise mechanisms for citizen feedback with regard to local government performance and service delivery.*

One of the often expressed objectives or advantages of a decentralised system of governance is that, by bringing government closer to the people, it increases accountability and therefore enhances local government performance and service delivery. In order to optimise the involvement of citizens, and to capitalise on the closeness between them and their local government, it is important to provide opportunities for feedback that are more frequent than the local election cycle. That is, citizens should be easily able to provide feedback, both formally and informally. An institutionalised mechanism for providing feedback will ensure that citizens, if they wish, will have opportunities to publicly ask questions of their representatives.

### **Case Study:**

In the state of **Karnataka** in India the level of government closest to the people is the Mandal Council. The Mandal Council consists of thirty members and covers a group of villages with a population of between 8000 and 12 000. Each Mandal Council in the state of Karnataka is legally required to hold village meetings (*Gram Sabhas*) in every village within its constituency bi-annually. All residents of the village are invited to the meetings. The objective of these meeting is to ensure the accountability of the Council to the people between elections and to provide people with opportunities to seek information and express their views on Council policies and actions. In most cases the *Gram Sabhas* have not fulfilled their potential due to poor participation, particularly by women and members of socially marginalized groups, and to the resentment felt by Mandal Councillors towards the whole *Gram Sabha* process (Crook and Manor 1998).