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RESOURCE CONVERGENCE IN 'PEOPLES PLANNING' BY WOMEN NEIGHBORHOOD GROUPS AND PEOPLE'S ELECTED WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES: A CASE STUDY OF DECENTRALISED LOCAL SELF GOVERNANCE

DR. JOSEPH ABRAHAM
PROJECT SOCIAL SCIENTIST
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ECONOMIC ADVISOR
MORD, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

ABSTRACT

The enormous resource potentials existing at PRI levels for resource convergence, plan integration and implementation have been utilized only partially in the people's plans through the grass roots level institutions like the grama sabhas. Enabling roles assigned to women peoples representatives for achieving decentralized participatory empowerment and development of poor women per se through the Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Neighborhood Groups (NHGs) based sort of development subsystems are yet to be consolidated and strengthened. Appropriate human resource, organization development and training strategies are the need of the time for promoting development of women through these grass roots level micro organizations. These women specific NHGs and SHGs have remained as the weakest links in decentralized planning efforts. In fact what has been achieved in the peoples planning at resource convergence, in integrated planning, execution and monitoring of women specific projects are only a tip of the iceberg as far as the needs identified as potentials existing and realized specifically for the gender based development, at the neighborhood levels for poverty alleviation and livelihoods promotion.

KEYWORDS

Area Development Society (ADS); Community Development Society (CDS); Decentralized Planning ; Elected Women Peoples Representatives ; Grama Sabhas; Neighbor Hood Groups (NHG) ; Panchayath Raj Institutions (PRIs) ; People's Planning ; Resource Convergence ; Rural Local Body/Grama Panchayath ; Self Help Groups (SHG) ; Urban Local Body/ Municipal Councils.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Convergence of resources and services at the level of Neighborhood Groups (NHGs) are also known as 'ayalkkootams' of women as an effective anti poverty strategy. It is a cherished goal of decentralized planning and development in Kerala. The Community Development Societies (CDS) and its organizational structures nurtured by the Government are to help achieve decentralized and participatory women development at grass roots level⁽¹⁾. The roles and responsibilities of elected women people's representatives are envisaged prominent in this task. The elected women people's representatives interface with CDS's women functionaries and government officials deserve more attention. The involvement of women in preparing micro and mini plans at Neighborhood Groups (NHG), and at Area Development Society (ADS) i.e. at ward level, is expected to promote larger and efficient resource convergences from different sources in the context of peoples planning in Kerala for poverty alleviation via self employment creation, thrift-loan for micro enterprises' development. Such potentials and its realizations have been investigated in this paper.

1.2. In Kerala as part of decentralized 'peoples plan campaign' the NHGs and Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been organized and promoted by the three tier Panchayath Raj Institution (PRIs). To facilitate people's direct participation in democratic decentralized governance, the Grama Sabha has been given statutory powers and functions in the Panchayath Raj Act (1994). And to promote the functioning of Grama Sabhas both general and specific purpose 'ayalkottams' have come into existence either spontaneously or being promoted by various interest groups, PRIs and the Government. These neighborhood groups have come to stay at the grass roots level micro organizations of decentralized participation and administration for economic development and empowerment of women in Kerala. Even the Sen Committee (CDP.1997) had recommended the earmarking of separate and autonomous functional areas for the self help groups and neighborhood groups and envisaged a major role for these in the Grama Sabha Deliberations.

1.3. Against the backdrop of the people's campaign for decentralized planned development experience, we propose to study the role of women's self help neighborhood activity for convergence of resources, services and infrastructure aiming at empowerment, development and poverty alleviation through thrift loans for micro enterprises promotion. The leadership of elected peoples representatives of local bodies, especially by those of the women councilors is expected to facilitate better convergence and integration of various women oriented programmes in the Panchayath Raj Institutions (PRIs). At least ten per cent of the Plan Fund of the PRIs has to be earmarked for women specific and directly beneficial to women empowerment activities. In this context, the Government officials of those departments having development functions have to follow programme specific instructions for identifying beneficiaries in the Grama Sabhas. A typical Grama Sabha in the Kerala context will mean a gathering of above 300 to 400 households and considering that on an average one adult is eligible for participating from each household and it would mean that about 350 odd participants would flock together. Such a large group would be unwieldy for exercising participatory planning for development. Hence the general, specific purpose and target oriented NHGs and SHGs have also been promoted and these in turn are playing special role in the Kerala's decentralized planning efforts. In this context we propose; i) to analyze the functioning of poor women's Neighborhood Groups as agents for convergence of resources, services and infrastructure facilities; ii) to study the role and interfacing functions of elected women representatives of people as facilitators of NHG activities for better resource convergences and plan integration at neighborhood level and; iii) to assess the officials involvement in these developmental efforts taken up by elected people's representatives and the women self help groups.

1.4. The structure of this paper is as follows; the introduction is followed by a review of research highlighting the conceptual, evolutionary, and methodological aspects of the role of NHGs and SHGs as subsystem level institutions in the Grama Sabhas of the PRIs and the people's plan. The evolution of peoples plan model, proliferation of peoples plan organizations, institutions and functionaries, peoples planning and Grama Sabhas, NHG-vis-à-vis SGs, Group Approach and Kudumbasree Mission Mode, and social capital civil society-state-action consideration are presented. The third section covers the structure of the organization and the methodology of functioning. The fourth section highlights, (a) roles functions and organizational arrangements of CDS as perceived by the people's women representative; (b) women leaders interface with the CDS functionaries and government officials; (c) needs identified for ADS micro plans and women involvement in micro planning; (d) elected women representatives' evaluation of CDS's women office bearers; (e) the NHGs needs sanctioned by the CDS down to the ADSs and NHGs levels; (f) progress of infrastructure works taken up by CDS; and (g) convergence of resources realized and of potentials existing. The last section presents the major findings and followed by the conclusions.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Kerala's Development Crises and Plan Models

2.1.1. We have the paradoxical and much acclaimed 'Kerala Development Model'; a high physical quality of life (PQLI), low economic growth, high unemployment rates, relatively high and stable absolute and relative poverty levels over the past decades in the state, and grass roots level politicalisation of social life. "Persistent stagnation in production sectors together with growing proportion of expenditures in the social sector was talking the economy to impasse". (George, 1993 in Mohan Kumar, 2002.P.492). The crises of Kerala Development Model were explained referring to the labor militancy, higher wages, trade union opposition to labor saving technologies, heavy burden of provision of social goods and services. (Kannan, 1998) All these are hoped to be overcome through the 'Decentralized Development Model' via 'peoples planning campaign' initiated in the Ninth Five Year Plan by the Left Democratic Front Government.

And this 'peoples plan model' pursued an integrated approach devoid of techno-economic refinements of the Growth Models based on resource allocation principals of axiomatic, atomistic behavior patterns (Thomas.1998). The Marxist ideologue EMS Namboodiripadu wrote, "this is a new experiment wherein people have mobilized with out resort to caste, creed or political party based differentiations for resource mobilization and plan implementation'. Those in power trying to stick to power and those outside it making efforts to capture power by resort to power politics need be replaced by a development politics centered on productivity increases" (in Thomas . 1998). Again this "Campaign promises to break the strait-jacket of bipolar front politics in the state and usher in a new era of unity for development action cutting across political affiliations" (Thomas. and Harilal .1997). Here in the role of the lowest rung of the ladder of mandatory local self-governing institutional bodies, the Grama Sabhas have been focused as very crucial. The 'Social Capital' and 'Civil Society' theorists (Putnam, 1993; Heller 1996, 2000) have put forward another model that the proliferation of institutions and increased associational life concomitant to peoples planning have positively contributed to the emergence of a vibrant civil society and thereby facilitated sustained local self development and good governance. However, as peoples plan was on, two economists had already come up with an 'Open Economy Model' and arrived at findings that the states economy is experiencing a turn around in growth and suggested remedies to the development crises (Harilal and Joseph , P.2286, P.2293)

Proliferation of Functionaries

2.2.1. The Government of Kerala and the State Planning Board made elaborate administrative arrangements and issued guidelines to all Panchayaths to make the Grama Sabha work out. Necessary 'associational' – 'organizational' functionaries were created and designed as : Conveners (Elected Peoples Representatives), coordinators (Govt. Officials), Task Force Members (experts-activists-voluntary elements, retired personnel, political activists etc), Beneficiary Committees, User Committees, Ward Committees, Resource Persons, Neighborhood Groups (NHGs) and Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women etc with specific functions and responsibilities. "The right to information is incorporated as a prominent feature of the Acts and Rules Governing local self Governance by these Panchayath Raj Institutions (PRIs)". (CDP.1997.P.3). The Committee on Decentralization of Powers (CDS) considered; that accountability to people is best ensured by being transparent and wanted eligibility criteria and prioritization instruction spelled out and incorporated into for beneficiary selection in the Grama Sabhas and that elected peoples representatives and staff transferred to PRIs needed skill development and managerial capacity building training to further professionalism in rendering services to the common man. All these new organizational functionaries are expected to become effective role models at local self-governance through women empowerment.

Peoples Planning –Grama Sabhas-NHGs and Women Participation

2.3.1 The Government of Kerala in the Local Administration Department and the State Planning Board has issued at least five Government Orders and Six Circulars (there may be many more) for the smooth conduct of Grama Sabhas. And addressed to the major task of beneficiary selection per se⁽²⁾. Perhaps by putting one of the most visible of the several contentious and difficult task, the beneficiary selection function, to Grama Sabhas, by the PRIs, the experiences generated in this process will tell us as a test does as to what really transpired in these sessions. During the first four phases of peoples planning campaign 4940 and 10497 'resource persons' were trained at state and district levels respectively by the State Planning Board. And about one lakh persons received/attended to trainings at Panchayath level to make the peoples plan through Grama Sabhas (Thomas I.M, 1998. PP.46-47). In this Special Grama Sabhas convened in 1996 about 27 lakhs people participated. The state level average participation was 180 persons per Grama Sabha, of Which 25,3, and 5 persons were women, SC/ST and officials respectively (Thomas ,1998. P.11, P.45 P.47.P.50). Assuming that all the Grama Sabhas held had the minimum statutory quorum of fifty persons, the participation rate was worked out to five percent of the total memberships in most Panchayaths (John, 1999. P.44). The performance of Grama Sabhas had been analyzed at length: i)the participation rates have varied widely among inter and intra Grama Panchayaths, Districts and Regions of the State; ii) participation of SC/STs (scheduled castes / tribes-weaker sections) has been grossly low; iii) women participation rate at 27 percent is very low, as women constitute more than fifty percent of the general population; iv) the variations in women participation rates were very high and more intense than in the general patterns observed; v) the grama Sabha meetings turned out to be mere venues for 'needs raising' and hardly any analysis of issues were done (Thomas , PP.50-51). The NHG level micro plans prepared and presented in the Grama Sabhas at ward level are consolidated at local body level and become part of 'peoples plan'.

Group Approach to Poverty Alleviation a Mission

2.4.1.The Kudumbasree is an anti poverty programme for women being jointly spearheaded by the Central and State Governments together with the NABARD in rural and urban areas of Kerala with the mission of total eradication abject poverty by 2008. The Acronym 'Kudumbasree' encompasses a transformed version combining all of the Urban Basic Services (UBS); Urban Basic Service for the Poor (UBSP); Urban Poverty Alleviation (UPA), and Urban Basic Services and Poverty Alleviation Programs (UBSP&PAP) initiated in the Seventh Five Year by the Central, State Governments together with UNICEF support. These programs aimed at the integrated development of poor women and children. The success of these programs in Alappuzha and Malapuram districts of Kerala induced its coverage in other parts of the state. The strategy focused is on the empowerment of poor by organizing them into Neighborhood Groups to promote thrift linked credit to members to take up micro enterprises and facilitate convergence of service and resources. And the Kudumbasree is a Government organized NGO (Go-NGO), registered under Societies Act with a prescribed byelaw and each Local Body will have to form such a unit. All the Community Development Societies (CDS) are federated into one single command structure under the Kudumbasree umbrella at the state level. Two major Central Government schemes SJSRY, NSDP and SGSY and JGSY for urban and rural areas respectively are linked to NHGs and its and its Self – Help Group unit activities as part of 'group approach' strategy⁽³⁾; for planning execution and monitoring of them and placed under the control of respective PRIs. However, the participatory basis of these women NHGs formed under the CDS model has been analyzed as grossly inadequate (Joseph ,2004)). The organizational and functional performance of these subsystems needed strengthening at all layers to achieve effective local self governance (Joseph ,2000)).

Self Help Groups vis-à-vis Neighborhood Groups of Women

2.5.1. The concepts of SHG and NHG of women are not the same. However, these two are often used to mean the same, but an erroneous approach. Thrift formation (small savings) and loan disbursal (micro credit) at consumption and micro enterprises formation are essential components of the activities of self help groups. These are specific purpose gathering or 'koottams'. An SHG membership may not be confined to one NHG only. While a neighborhood group (NHG) is an 'ayalkoottam' emergent based on favorable unifying factors like natural boundaries, settlements patterns, rivers-stream caste-religion-community, considerations etc. The NHGs are essentially bound and constrained by space, proximity and loyalty considerations.

2.5.2. In Kudumbasree parlance SHGs and NHGs have tented to be considered as the same, since thrift formation and credit disbursal through self-help by the risk affected families at micro enterprising and consumption demands are the key activities around which these NHGs are formed⁽⁴⁾. These are essentially NHGs of the poor people. Whereas in the 'peoples plan' of the PRIs general and specific purpose SHGs and NHGs have been formed to meet with the requirements of Central Government Scheme guidelines and to provide special protection to Women and Weaker section (SC/STs) etc. where in 'group approach' has been encouraged.

2.5.3 An array of experimentations with NHGs can be enlisted, apart from the popular state sponsored and UNICEF supported Alleppy and Malappuram models; the Kanjipadam Model by Pankajakshan (1989); the Nalpathimala Model by Abraham (1993); and the Kallyaseri Model of KSSP by Thomas et all (1995) besides those by some of the popular NGOs of the state like MDS-Kanjirapally, KSSS-Kottayam and PDS-Peermade models etc. The niche enjoyed and space occupied by these powerful NGOs at NHG and SHG activity had to reassess and reformulate its work given the onslaught of peoples plan SHGs and NHGs by women.

2.5.4 There had been a proliferation of SHGs in the state due to the facilitating environment offered by the peoples planning campaign from 1997-98 onwards. The group approach insisted upon by the Government of India for implementing its urban and rural development schemes; Swarnjayanthi Grama Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), Swarna Jayanthi Shehari Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY), etc have encouraged SGH activity abetted by the peoples plan campaign. A strong positive correlation between SHG activity and Grama Sabah's smooth conducts in the state have been empirically established. Some of the Grama Panchayaths have 35 to 70 percent of its women population got registered in the SHG activities of the Local Bodies⁽⁵⁾. Their prime motive being receiving of economic assistance, availing of cheaper credit, training at micro enterprises formation etc. These women SHGs have become focal points were in subjects like; women and child development, literacy, health and education, plan projects and schemes, Grama Sabhas conduct etc get discussed. Members of these SHGs have subsequently moved up and became functionaries and office bearers of Beneficiary Committees, User Committees, Task Force Members, and Resource Persons and even got elected as Panchayath Members, Presidents and some got government jobs etc.

Social Capital – Civil Society – State Action

2.6.1. Peoples planning campaign have positively contributed to social capital formation and in building up a progressive civil society through the creation of new institution and organizations that enable local self-governance for sustainable local development. The peoples plan campaign" has added to the already dense network of associational life that Kerala has built up through years of social mobilization accompanied by concomitant" (Heller 1996). In Kerala the formation of social capital and emergence of civil society have not taken place independent of state action .And Grama Sabha is now the only sub system level mandatory institution in which social capital- civil society-state action and local self – good governance efforts are to converge.

2.6.2. According to Putnam (1993), "Social Capital fosters reciprocity, facilitates information flows for mutual benefit and creates trust and once these takes place, they tend to be self generating as future generations are induced into these norms, and hence assumes significance particularly in local level development and poverty alleviation. It is expected to have a positive effect on economic development and growth". However, the underlying realities of these theorizing are deeply embedded with the SHG and NHG based activities at local governance is implicit enough under the Panchayath Raj set up.

III. THE ORGANIZATION CONSIDERED AND THE METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

3.1.1. The Community Development Society (CDS) is a registered organization of poor women households identified through a statewide survey in 1995⁽⁶⁾. The poor households had been identified using a nine -point risk index of poverty as an alternative to the existing approach to measurement of poverty⁽⁷⁾. The risk affected poor families have been organized into a three-tier sub system consisting of the Neighborhood Groups (NHGs) at the grass roots level, the Area Development Society (ADS) at ward, and Community Development Society(CDS) at middle and apex levels respectively⁽⁸⁾. For each of these three tiers the roles and functions of ordinary members, elected office bearers and elected representatives are laid down in the byelaws made mandatory by the state government. The CDS has three other high power functional and policy-making committees as well⁽⁹⁾. All elected women representatives are also mandatory members in these high power committees at the Local body/Nagarapaliks levels. An elected member is the Chairman of each of the Area Development Committees at ward level. The four major functional areas for the CDS set up are: (1) women's participation in self help and thrift loan activities for self employment-micro enterprises promotion; (2) child and mother development; (3) convergence of resources and services for speedy achievement of the objective of poverty alleviation in absolute and relative terms and; (4) education and health care development of the poor women and children.

3.1.2. To achieve the above goals the CDS set up designed in such away to function only as a subsystem of elected local body in the urban and rural areas. And the two centrally sponsored schemes the Swarna Jayanthi Shehari Rozgar Scheme (SJSRY), Swarnjayanthi Garmin Roghar Yojana (SGSY) and the National Slum Development Scheme (NSDP) are exclusively implemented via the CDS organizational structures. At each of the three tiers micro, mini, and master plans are prepared by the NHGs, ADSs and the CDSs respectively, for every financial year and are approved, implemented, and monitored by the local bodies along with annual decentralized people's plans. The local body under study has an above average, medium level of performance in the district and state as such. Out of the thirty two members in this local body, eleven are women⁽¹⁰⁾. All these eleven members (i.e. 100 % coverage) have been met personally by the author⁽¹¹⁾ and explained the purpose of the study and questionnaires got filled up themselves and assisted by investigators. The details gathered are analyzed and presented below. There are 92 NHGs constituting 3226 risk families in the Chengancherry Nagarapaliks/Council of Kottayam district of Kerala from which the sample data was collected.

3.1.3. The CDS's ordinary members being poor women from the risk families grouped in to NHGs. In each NHG, on an average, there will be 20 to 40 risk families. Each NHG will have a five member elected body to manage its day-to-day activities. The president of the NHG will chair meeting and manage all NHG activities. The Secretary also known as Resident Community Volunteer (RCV) of an NHG will perform all secretarial functions in the NHG. The other three members from the five member committee will look after: i) health and education, ii) employment, and iii) infrastructure development functions respectively.

3.1.4. An ADS for every 200 risk family or for every 10 NHGs have to be formed. All the five members of the Governing body of an NHGs will constitute an ADSs electoral General Body, out of which a nine number Governing Body will be elected, of them the ADS Chairperson will have to be an NHG Secretary, and its Vice President be an NHG Secretary or President, and out of seven committee members four have to be from among NHG secretaries and two from NHG Presidents and one an ordinary committee member. A field level Government Official either a JPHI (Junior Public Health Inspector), a Nurse (JPHN), a Village Extension Officer (VEO) is being designated as the Community Organizer and to function as Member Secretary of the ADS. Besides these other field level officials can be co-opted into ADS Committee. Again, at the ADS level an Advisory Committee have been set up with the elected ward member as the Chairperson to provide guidance, co-operation and helps integration of all poverty alleviation activities of the NHGs. All NHG secretaries, two members elected from NHG presidents, all Anganwadi workers of the area, JPHI/JPHN/VEO in charge of the ward, and up to three nominated social workers will be members. An Official- the Community Organizer will be the Member Secretary to this Committee.

3.1.5. The CDS General Body consists of all ADS Chairpersons; all member secretaries of ADSs, one representative of a training institution, and the Child Development Project Officer will be a member. The nominated members will have no voting rights. The CDS Governing Body elected from the General Body consists of one president, one vice-president, four members from the ADS Chairpersons and three members from among ADS Vice Chairpersons. Another important committee has been formulated at the CDS level in the PRIs; the CDS Advisory Committee. These two high power committees are the decision-making bodies for the CDS at the local body level. All these CDS Structures are federated into one roof called the Kudumbhasree Mission of the State Government, set up with the sole objective of removal of poverty by 2008. This well streamlined institution at noble tasks needs a careful study is evident enough, as it gives thrust to SHGs, NHGs, and Grama Sabha activities of PRIs at local self-good Governance in the decentralized peoples planning in Kerala and aims at women empowerment. Both in the rural and urban areas of the state same organizational patterns are followed for these exclusive women manned organizations.

IV. CASE STUDY RESULTS**Roles, Functions, and Organizational Arrangements**

4.1.1. The results of a sample survey conducted are revealing many appalling facets of this women empowerment strategy. Ten out of all the eleven women leaders in this local body correctly knew the number of NHGs functioning in their respective wards. Only one among these councilors did not attend to any of the NHG meeting so far. Three women members reported that the NHGs are not functioning satisfactory. Five out of the eleven members reported that they have so far not chaired an ADS Advisory Committee meeting of which they are the Chairperson as per bylaw. And, three of them reported that the functioning of ADS as not effective at all. All these women leaders do agree that NHGs exclusively for women are very relevant and useful for women empowerment and development, yet our findings indicate that these representatives have not fully identified themselves with NHG and SHG activities nor have they taken it up as a serious task of theirs in their capacity as people's elected representatives.

Women Leaders Interface with Functionaries and Officials

4.2.1. Two women representatives reported that a large number of the identified risk families are really not risk affected, as exemptions are noted by them. According to majority of these women members, most of the office bearers of ADSs do not have adequate knowledge to work for the NHGs. About forty percent of these lady representatives think that the ADS office bearers do not have the required sincerity and that they do not set good examples of service to the other NHG members as well. In fact forty percent of women members reported that ADS office bearers do not co-operate with them in the development efforts carried out by the local body. The officials that are found participating in the NHG level activities are only from the Nagarapaliks / Local body level, followed by Water Authority (WA) and Banks; and no other development staff of other governmental departments {Social Welfare (SW), Education (Edu)}; visited these NHGs as part of their routine duties as otherwise mandated. However, a visit to an NHG has yet not become part of a field level officials job chart prescribed by the local bodies and line departments, must be an eye opener to 'people's planners'. The CDS functionaries, its officials and related other development departmental staff have not sufficiently interfaced or lisoned with these women elected members in achieving the avowed objectives of poverty alleviation and decentralized development is evident.

Needs Identified in Micro Plans

4.3.1. Fifty percent of these women representatives have reported of their non-preparation of NHG and ADS level micro and mini plans; a similar number of them did not participate in the ADS level mini plan preparation efforts at all (Table 1). This may be a strong coincidence, but a strange one, a case to worry about the sort of participatory planning exercises going on in the Grama Sabhas. The Needs identified in the ADS level plans prepared have been for sanitation, housing, self-employment, drinking water, skill development etc in the descending order of priority ranked by NHGs and ADSs.

4.3. 2. These women leaders have reported that their ADS's have identified and demanded the inclusion of following items; thirty- nine houses, thirty-one latrines, thirty three self employment projects, and fifty nine training campus (Table .2) in the CDS level macro plan to be prepared. For the current year (2000-01) financial allocations mobilized by them varied from Rs 2 lakhs to Rs 12 lakhs in their respective wards as reported in (Table. 4). Further, two of these councilors reported of no resources or funds earmarked in their wards for NHGs are a matter of concern to find answers for. Such results indicate the poor performance of these elected members and also speak volumes regarding the state of affairs of women leadership functioning in this local body.

TABLE 1: NEED IDENTIFICATION IN THE ADS PLANS OF WOMEN PEOPLES REPRESENTATIVES

Ward Codes	NHG/ADS prepared Micro/Mini Plans		You participated in ADS/CDS plan preparation?		Needs identified in the ADS's plan prepared (items/Nos)						
	YES	NO	Yes	No	House (Nos)	Latrine (Nos)	Drinking water taps (Nos)	Electrification	Self Employment	Training	Others
	1W1	Yes			No	12	4	2		4	6
3W2		No		No	5	3	4	9	3	4	
6W3		No		No	10						
8W4	Yes			No	2	8	3	3	14	7	2
13W5	Yes			No	1						
18W6	Yes		Yes								
20W7	Yes		Yes		3	4	2	8	1	4	
24W8	Yes		Yes		15	20	10	25	15	10	5
26W9		No	Yes		20	10	4	10	15	10	10
30W10		No	Yes		8	12	2		24	15	
11W11		No		No	18	61	13	9	11	8	
Total					94	122	40	64	87	64	17

Source: Field study

However, during 1999-00 from People's Plan Fund Rs 30 lakhs had been converged to NHG levels these women functionaries (Table 4). The potential to earmark and expend resources exclusively for women development have been tapped by these women councilors to a limited extend, during the initial three years of the first peoples plan. The causes for wide variations in the realized and planned expenditures need to be separately analyzed, but done here. Yet the potential for convergence of resources at NHG level is remarkable and evident from experience in this case.

TABLE 2: NHG NEEDS SANCTIONED BY AREA DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

Ward codes	How many application have your ADS given to CDS for approval.							
	House		Latrine		Drinking Water	Electrification	Self Empt	Training
	No	Rs	No	Rs	No	No	No	No
1W1	13		4		2		4	6
2W3	2	26500						
3W6								
4W8	2		3		1			1
5W13								
6W18	10		8		3		12	15
7 W20	3		4		2		1	5
8W24	8	24000	10				10	10
9W26	1	24000	2	1500 per	2	2	6	7
10W30								7
11W11								8
Total	39	2425000	31	46500	9	2	33	59

Source: Field study

Elected Representatives' Evaluation of Officials

4.4.1. Only three women representatives reported of participating in the CDS level Advisory and Management Committees that are live. In fact that all other eight members are not participating indicates that these committees have been not made functional at all. The performance of CDS Project Officer, the Govt. Official in charge of coordinating the program, has been assessed as 'good' by eight lady respondents to a note of exemption by three members. The performance of two other Local Body Officials functioning, as CDS Community Organizers (both women) have been rated 'good' to the exemption note by four of them. Women representatives have almost uniformly rated the performances of CDS's women President as 'poor', and that District Coordinator as consistently 'good'.

The NHG's Needs Sanctioned

4.5.1. Four of the women representatives have not reported of any item of NHG needs being sanctioned to their respective ADS may be due to non-access to data or due to lack of interest in ADS activities as such an outcome may not be conducive to the member's interests; while all the others have given details of sanction of at least one item of demand placed with CDS by their ADS. Only twenty-five houses, seventeen self-employment projects, fifteen skill formation trainings, thirteen sanitary latrines etc have been reported as being approved in the CDS action plans (Table .3). This involves gaps in sanctions and under reporting as the requirements in all these areas are at high levels.

TABLE 3: THE NHGS NEEDS SANCTIONED TO ADS'S FROM THE CDS PLAN

Ward Code	The NHGs Needs Sanctioned to ADS by CDS						
	Houses		Latrine		Drinking Water	Self Employment	Trainings
	Nos	Rs	Nos	Rs	Nos	Nos	Nos
1W1	10		4		2	4	6
2W3							
3W6							
4W8	2		1	1500	1	6	1
5W13							
6W18	4		6		1	1	1
7W20			2		2	1	5
8W24	8	24000				5	
9W26	1						2
10W30							
11W11							
Total	25	600000	13	19500	9	17	15

Source: Field study

Progress of Works

4.6.1. Physical progress of various works have been reported only by two women members, two others reported to have sanctioned some of the works and did not know the present position of works sanctioned from the CDS action plans in their respective wards. It was evident that the progress of works was tardy and they had not attended to the task of speedy implementation of these CDs works at infrastructure development as per Action plans of the NHGs. Hence the utilization of available funds on infrastructure development of NHG's had been negligible.

TABLE 4: CONVERGED RESOURCES TO WOMEN NHGS AND CONVERGENCE POTENTIAL IN PEOPLES PLAN BY ELECTED WOMEN MEMBERS

Ward Codes	You helped/ assisted the women NHGs in the ward from sources Other than CDS funds for 1999-00			Amount earmarked in 2000-01 Peoples Plan Funds for your wards Development to NHGs		
	Items	Nos	Rs	Items	Nos	Rs
1W1	Houses	6	200000	Roads	2	300000
	Latrines	13	32500			
	Subtotal	19	232500		2	300000
2W3	Nil					
3W6	Houses	2	50000	Works	6	300000
	Latrine	12	30000	SC/ST	1	125000
	Training	5	10000		1	100000
	Driving	5	10000	Bridge	1	300000
	Maintain houses	3	15000			
	Tailoring Machines	10	20000			
	Sub Total	37	115000		9	825000
4W8	Houses	1	32500	Roads	1	200000
	Latrines	3	5500			
	Training	2	6000			
	Driving	5	10000			
	Roads	1	10000			
	Sub Total	12	64000		1	200000
5W13	Houses	10	240000	Roads	2	540000
	Houses	11	330000	Bunds	1	250000
	Latrines	25	56250	Bunds	1	340000
	Training	15		House	3	90000
	SCP		600000	Latrine	5	10000
	TSP		75000			
	Bridge		800000			
	Sub Total	61	2101250		12	1230000
6W18	House Maintenance	3	25000	PWD work	1	300000
	Tailoring Machines	9	18000	SC/ST Development works		75000
	Electrification			House	3	84000
	Drinking water			Latrine	5	10000
	Sub Total	12	43000	Others		280000
				9	749000	
7W20	House	3	114000	Roads	2	300000
	Latrines	2	5000			
	Sub Total	5	119000		2	300000
8W24	Book Distribution			Roads	2	300000
	Training of Computer			House	11	281000
	House			Latrine	5	12500
	Latrine			Electrification of House	20	25000
	Electrification of House			Maintenance of House	2	10000
	Sub total				40	628500
9W26	Roads	2	300000			
	House	1	24000			
	Latrines	2	3000			
	Subtotal	5	327000			
10W30	Nil					
11W11						
	Grand total	-	3001750			4232500

Source: Field study.

Convergence of Resources Realized and Potentials

4.7.1. When the elected women members responded to a question as to funds expended for members of women NHGs in their respective wards from funds other than CDS funds, the figures of expenses and items executed showed wide variations with regard to item numbers and fund utilized. During the first three years of peoples planning the amounts expended varied from Rs.43 lakhs to 21 lakhs, from among these lady councilors (Table .4). The total amount of funds converged by 1999-00.was Rs 30 lakhs, is by all means a substantial gain to the NHGs and SHGs. And for the year 2000-01 the postulated amount have been Rs 42 lakhs, is indicative of positive growth in this regard (Table .4).

V. MAJOR FINDINGS AND POLICY CONCERNS

1. The risk family identification surveys were done inadequately and less comprehensively. Errors of omission and inclusion were rampant in the risk family lists, which could have been kept to a bare minimum had the elected members exercised their mandatory powers. On the contrary they themselves were encouraging erroneous list preparation.
2. Majority of women elected representatives reported that the CDSs' women functionaries and office bearers lacked the required knowledge to work for NHGs as sub systems at local planning and development. The CDSs' women functionaries are from among the lower socio economic strata and needs skill, knowledge and hand holding from the elected PRI functionaries. Whereas the power structures at the PRI and higher levels want to subjugate and make use of these SHGs for well entrenched partisan political interests. Hence, the SHGs fail to realize its avowed objectives of poverty alleviation and livelihood security promotion.
3. Forty percent of women representatives reported that the CDS women functionaries do not cooperate with them in carrying out developmental activities planned by the local body. These CDS functionaries are indirectly elected from the SHG to ADS and to CDS and into the PRI in a well streamlined manner as compared to the elected people's representatives who contest direct elections from within a political party set up. The lack of coherence between these two set of development functionaries at the grass roots have remained a major area of conflict of interests and divergent concerns. These functionaries need be trained in conflict resolution and peace negotiation skills for making peoples plans.
4. Forty per cent of these women representatives reported that no NHG/ADS level mini plans were prepared by these bodies contrary to the claims that all of the NHGs and ADSs have prepared micro and mini plans. What actually happens is preparation of semblance of plans only at the SHG and ADS levels and subsequently finalized by the dictates of bureaucracy. The capacity building of SHGs functionaries have to be more systematic and vigorously undertaken at the PRI levels.
5. As per the report of the Secretaries' of NHGs about forty percent of women councilors did not participate nor assisted in the NHG and ADS level plan preparation efforts. These weak organizations often do not receive the much needed hand holding and support from the elected members for oblivious reasons emanating from power equations at grass roots level. Ways to reconcile and co-ordinate the functioning of the formal mandatorily elected peoples representative and the informal voluntary functionaries is a felt need .
6. There had been wide variations between the needs identified by the NHGs and ADSs and that sanctioned by the CDS in turn to its beneficiary members. Much remains to be done to strengthen the vast scope of the tasks assigned to this institution by converging substantial resources to them. The wide gaps noted in the needs identified and sanctioned to these subsystems at decentralized planning have to be bridged by suitable resource redeployments strategies by the PRIs.
7. The peoples' elected women representatives did help the NHGs with funds from different sources in the range of Rs 34000 to Rs 21 lakhs, e.g. from Plans funds during 1997-00, to a total of Rs 30 lakhs, but not effected to the extent possible by convergence of resources and services. As these currently converged funds to the SHGs are tiny sums compared to the huge plan funds placed at the disposal per PRIs say to the tune of Rs 2 crores per annum i.e. Rs 7 lakhs per an elected member on an average. Thus out of Rs 77 lakhs per annum per member for three years which would work out to about Rs 24 crores of it only Rs 30 lakhs exclusively for SHGs is just only 13 percent of total plan funds converged for poverty alleviation and livelihoods promotion at the sub system level.
8. During the reference year of this study (2000-01) substantial funds had been placed by some of the lady representatives in their wards in the range of Rs 2 to 12 lakhs; to a total of Rs 42 lakhs from plan funds of the local body's People's Plan, for NHG's development needs is indicative of a spurt in resource commitments to grass roots level. The existent large scope for converging funds at NHG level is not tapped to the extent possible. Also the increase observed in the current year at fund convergence is marginal compared to previous years from 1997 to 2000.
9. The full participation of all women representatives in the local body level exclusive apex committees for SHG based development is not being ensured at the PRI level. These apex committees are not functional as its role play is not kept up by the elected members. The mandate to attend these committees is yet to find the proper role play by the power wielding interest groups at grass roots levels within the PRIs.
10. A majority of these peoples representatives reported that the performance of its indirectly elected women President of this subsystem (the CDS) as 'poor'. For the latter's poor performance the former is more responsible than the official bureaucracy is born out from the study. The CDS president finds it very a challenging task to push through its demand driven action plans through the PRI power structure.

VI. CONCLUSION

6.1. The enormous potentials existing at neighborhood levels for resource convergences, plan integration and implementation have been utilized only partially. Enabling roles assigned to peoples' women representatives for achieving decentralized participatory empowerment and development of women per se through the SHG and NHG development subsystems have yet to be consolidated and strengthened. Appropriate human resource, organization development and training strategies are the need of the time for promoting development of women through these grass roots level organizations. These women specific NHGs and SHGs have remained as the weakest links in decentralized planning efforts. In fact what has been achieved in the peoples planning at resource convergence, in integrated planning, in execution and monitoring of projects are only a tip of the iceberg as far as the needs identified and potentials existing at the neighborhood levels for poverty alleviation and livelihood security development.

6.2. The elected peoples representatives, government officials having development functions, and beneficiary micro organizations all have to work as a combined system with given set of objectives. This has remained a distant reality as each of these groups are trying to protect its own self interest only and in this process doesn't strike a note of harmony is a matter of grave concern for development of women through self help neighborhood activities at poverty alleviation. The importance of information Education Communication (IEC) strategy at capacity building of these grass roots level organizations, institutions, its functionaries and participant beneficiaries is evident from the results of this study.

6.3. Our findings suggest that on the one hand, decentralized development plan model building, social capital-civil society and state action theorizing are indeed useful but on the other hand the ground level realities of the situation pose formidable challenges to be overcome, to move in the directions of Good Local Self Governance that will bring happiness to the common man in the short run as well. At least ten per cent of the plan funds released to PRIs be mandated for capacity building of the Grama Sabha and its sub systems to ensure effective women empowerment and gender equality.

NOTES

1. G.O (MS) No. 19/98/plg. Dt. 4/5/1998, Department of Planning, Government of Kerala.
2. The various Government Orders and Circulars issued for the smooth conduct of Decentralized Planning have been brought in two volumes by the Cap-Deck, (2002) under the auspices of the State Planning Board.
3. See, Swarnjayanti Gramin Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) (1999) and SJSRY (1998) guidelines of Government of India wherein group approach has been insisted upon and the Rural Development Block facilitated Group formation in Panchayaths. For e.g. The Ettumanoor Block of Kerala had formed 12 SHGs women

- and disbursed Rs 13 and Rs 14 lakhs each as subsidy and credit to 120 women members as part of SGSY in 1999-00. There are such 152 Block in Blocks in Kerala.
4. G.O (MS) 111/98/LAD Dt. 29/5/1998, Department of Local Administration Govt. of Kerala.P.2.
 5. John M.S (2002, p 1945) in Economic and Political Weekly, May 18-24, No.20.
 6. Trained volunteers were deployed by Government to conduct these surveys in the State. Ref. G.O (Rt) No. 794/95/LAD.Dt Thiruvananthapuram 18/2/95
 7. The poverty index consists of nine risk factors; (1) Do the respondent household own a fit for stay house? (2)Is there a sanitary latrine? (3) Is there safe drinking water within 150-meter distance? (4) There is only one earning member in the family; (5) There is a child below 5 years of age in the home; (6) There is a member addicted to drug, alcohol, (7) An SC/ST household, (8) An illiterate person is present, (9) the household is having only 2 square meals a day. A household scoring 4 out of these nine are identified as poor.
 8. The abbreviation often used in the study are: CDS-Community Development Society; ADS-Area Development Society; RCV-Residential Community Volunteer; NHG-Neighborhood Groups; SHG-Self Help Groups;
 9. These Advisory Committees have been given powers to approve or change etc of CDS action plans as and when felt needed only after getting clarification from CDS. Ref.G.O.(MS) No.292/94/LAD Dt. Thiruvananthapuram. 26/12/98. The other committees are (a) Management Committee, (b) the CDS Governing Committee, (c) and ADS Advisory Committees.
 10. One Third of seats in the Local Bodies are earmarked as per statute, for women, hence out of 32 council seats 11 have been reserved for lady members.
 11. Author of this paper was the District Level Coordinating Officer to this specific project in Kottayam district during 1999&2001-01, due to the personal touch involved the reliability of the data gathered is thought to be more trust worthy.

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