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Policy Note

## Improving Grassroots Governance

*Points for consideration by Committee to Review the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act 1993 chaired by Shri Ramesh Kumar*

*Prepared by*

**Grassroots Research And Advocacy Movement, Mysore**

Dr. R Balasubramaniam  
Sham N. Kashyap  
Rohit Shetti

## Overview

Karnataka has been one of the pioneering states in India with regard to ensuring that decentralization of governance is effected on the ground with the Karnataka Panchayath Raj Act having been in effect in the state for two decades since it was passed in the Legislative Assembly. In an effort to improve the PRIs and their functioning, the Department of RDPR, Govt. of Karnataka has rightly initiated a process of review and consultations to make the provisions of the Act better by setting up a Committee for the same.

This note is prepared by Grassroots Research And Advocacy Movement (GRAAM), Mysore with the intention of providing inputs that can lead to strengthening of grassroots for consideration by the aforementioned Committee. The points listed in the note mainly touch upon administrative reforms, measures that can make Grama Sabhas more effective and steps that can be taken towards improving transparency and accountability along with more democratization.

### Administrative reforms

1. Ensure convergence and standardization of processes at grassroots level. This is applicable to different schemes that are implemented by the Gram Panchayath level. Presently each scheme entails different administrative, implementation, reporting and community involvement mechanisms.  
  
For e.g. Housing, MNREGA, Finance Commission Grants, other departmental programme beneficiaries have different operational mechanisms
2. Convergence (including HR convergence) can be achieved effectively by bringing homogeneity at the scheme design level (and cannot be expected to function at the implementation level without the same), especially Mission Mode Programs. The visioning as well as planning of how convergent action is expected at the implementation level, as well as capacity building of people must be made at the State and District levels.
3. **Rationalization and streamlining of community bodies / sub-committees of the GP:** Numerous committees are mandated at the GP level and below with different financial, administrative and operational mechanisms instituted by different departments. Roles, responsibilities, authority and accountability mechanisms of these committees as well as the 3 standing committees of the GP mandated by the KPR Act need to be clear and unambiguous. The position of the office bearers need to be relooked at, since the elected GP members of a village head multiple committees leading to ineffective functioning of some committees. Committees with similar objectives and working on similar issues should be merged, and having a maximum limit on the number of committees that an individual can be part of must be considered.

It must be explored if the fund distribution to the committees can be handled by the GP directly, so that mutual accountability and ownership of various public institutions can vest with the GP.

4. **Effective auditing and Performance Assessment:** The effectiveness of a GP depends on the timely responsiveness of the other two tiers of the PRIs. Current auditing/Jamabandhi processes look at the GP as an independent entity and assess its financial and administrative efficiency with very limited consideration of affecting factors such as the support of the TP and ZP. Therefore, scheme level performance audits have to be constituted that not only look at GP level performances, but also the timeliness and responsiveness of the upper tiers in approval of plans, transfer of funds and monitoring of GP implementation. Thus, Taluk and Zilla Panchayath functionaries have to be assessed based on process indicators of GP performance and their participation in overseeing the progress of GP activities.
5. **Direct election to the post of the GP President and Vice President & their terms:** The GP is a democratic body with powers of planning, resource mobilization and execution that can directly address the development concerns of the people of the GP. It is therefore suggested that the people have a say in deciding who the head of this body is going to be, rather than the currently existing indirect form of electing the President and Vice President. Towards this, direct election of the President and Vice President of the GP may be considered. This direct form of election can increase accountability and effective governance at the GP level. Further, the terms of the President and Vice President should be increased to a minimum of 3 years to ensure continuity of development initiatives undertaken. The increase of term will also reduce the periods of inactivity of the GP, which normally occurs around the time of the election. The shift from the existing indirect form of electing the GP President and Vice President to the direct election will have substantial impact on the processes of democratic leadership and its nurturing among marginal groups, roles and stakes of other GP members and other political processes at the GP level and beyond. Hence, a careful, phased approach is suggested for this shift. Ideally, the direct elections could be piloted to understand the pros and cons and to prepare checks and balances, before a full amendment to the legislation is brought.

#### Making Grama Sabhas effective

6. The onus of making Grama Sabhas (GS) effective is not just on the GP, but also on the entire governance structure of development. In addition to the GP, other line departments that play a role in addressing development needs expressed in the GS should also be accountable. Thus, it is crucial that together with the

bureaucrats and the GP members, the officials of line departments mandatorily attend and respond to queries raised in the GS<sup>1</sup>.

7. Planning and implementation of development schemes (irrespective of the implementing agency) at the village level that needs the involvement of Grama Sabha must match with the issues and schedule of the Grama Sabha. At the same time, there must be provision in such schemes, to be responsive to the development needs expressed by people in Grama Sabhas.

A way of operationalizing this is to mandatorily have 4 pre-scheduled Grama Sabhas in a year, with line departments and the GP being in sync about the schedule and the issues discussed in the GS. Predetermined objectives of each line department (like planning, beneficiary selection, expenditure tracking and progress monitoring) and the GP for each such GS should be set in advance for the year. This may be done through necessary legislation. The information about these Grama Sabhas must be well publicised and necessary preparations including awareness generation among people must be done in advance. Through 4 Grama Sabhas in a year, it would be possible to track the full cycle of implementation of development schemes of the GP as well as the related line departments.

8. The decisions taken at each GS should be accompanied by deadlines, which should be used as indicators to monitor the performance of specific schemes and programmes. The officials conducting performance audit of schemes must use these deadlines to schedule their audits so that monitoring of development interventions is effective.
9. **Transparency towards breaking down asymmetry of information:** It may be laid out in no uncertain terms that Grama Sabhas have the right to question and seek information and not merely be a passive collective of beneficiaries. The GP as well as the line departments must proactively disclose information about
  - a. Decisions taken and their rationale (especially in the case of contractor centric work)
  - b. Progress of works (through videos, photographs and other means)
  - c. Beneficiary selections and justifications, wherever necessary
  - d. Proof of documentation, proper storage and archival

The Grama Sabhas must be used as platforms for sharing such information.

#### **Paving way for community monitoring using technology:**

10. The advances in computing, global positioning systems and mobile technology show immense potential for effective community monitoring of grassroots development initiatives. New possibilities in increasing transparency and

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<sup>1</sup> Currently, most line department officials perceive their role as being limited to providing awareness and token attendance in the GS

accountability using technology are emerging continuously, which should be capitalized for increasing the effectiveness of grassroots governance. The Department of RDPR in coordination with other departments must take continuous initiatives in setting up the environment for effective community monitoring of services, schemes and programmes provided by various government agencies using technology. To begin with, the process can be initiated in the sectors of education, health and public distribution system. The Government must invest in the technology backend and secured maintenance of data and partner with reliable civil society organizations that would play the front end role of facilitating community participation in monitoring, analyse the data collected and support the Government in bringing a manifold improvement in the reach and effectiveness of its development interventions.

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## A GRAAM Creation

*GRAAM (Grassroots Research And Advocacy Movement) is a public policy research and advocacy initiative based in Mysore, India focusing on research incorporating grassroots perspectives and advocacy based on empirical evidence that reflects community 'voice' and is characterized by a collaborative approach. Incubated in Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM) for about 3 years since January 2011, GRAAM has undertaken research, evaluation, consultancy projects and advocacy initiatives in the sectors of public health, education, sanitation, nutrition, human development, livelihoods, disabilities, CSR and media. For more information, please visit [www.graam.org.in](http://www.graam.org.in)*

**Grassroots Research And Advocacy Movement**

CA-2, KIADB Industrial Housing Area, Hebbal, Ring Road, Mysore – 570017

Contact: +91 9686666306 | [graam@graam.org.in](mailto:graam@graam.org.in)