

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND PARTICIPATORY PLANNING – LESSONS FROM THE KERALA EXPERIENCE

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What is Social Accountability?

Accountability in its basic sense implies rendering of accounts and, by extension, indicates answerability to an external agency or group and, further, implies ensuring propriety, legality and safeguarding public interest in satisfaction of the expectations of the external agency or group. Social Accountability suggests accountability to the people. It is a core value in a democratic set up. In a decentralized democracy the basic objective is power to the people.

The concept of social accountability is best expressed in the Gandhian idea of government as a trusteeship discharging its duties as trustees of the people. This conveys the impression of power being exercised in a fair, equitable, honest, and responsive manner – as required by law and in accordance with assigned responsibilities and expected performance standards.

Social accountability extends to the entire gamut of the functioning of local governments and includes exercise of authority, taking of decisions, use of funds and attitude and behaviour. It is not just adherence to rules that is important in social accountability. There has to be a doing of right. More than efficiency and effectiveness, it is humaneness and morality which characterizes social responsibility.

Social accountability is towards people at large and specifically voters, clients and target groups. Though not clearly demarcable, every government and local government has an element of general social accountability to all citizens, besides specific social accountability to user groups and target groups. Often in practice levels of accountability vary with levels of development. Though educated and better off citizens are able to enforce the required level of social accountability it is the poor who need to extract maximum social accountability particularly in use of anti-poverty funds and decisions relating to the poor. From this angle, local governments need to have higher social accountability as their functional domain has elements of service delivery, social justice and economic development focusing on the relatively less well off people. Social accountability is required basically to reaffirm the rationale of democracy.

Social accountability ensures transparency, reduces leakages, forces proper spending of funds, generates trust and peace, creates demand-led improvement in services. In a sense, it is a continuing audit and a constant check on malfeasance.

Technically accountability implies power and control by the people but in practice social accountability does not lead to sanctions, surcharges or punishments in a narrow sense. But it can bring about distance, alienation and finally rejection by the people of the government.

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Social accountability can be absolute as in the right to recall or veto of decisions. It can be partial as in the right to know and the power of voice. In the case of social audit leading to some kind of sanctions it is probably between these two levels.

For social accountability to be real and meaningful, it has to be enshrined in law, encapsulated in policy, ensconced in institutions, embedded in processes and procedures and, most important of all, espoused earnestly by the governors and the governed. This is illustrated in the case study of Kerala described below:

Approach to Decentralization in Kerala

The conventional approach to decentralization is to transfer powers and responsibilities in degrees on the basis of gradual capacity building. In the case of democratic decentralization this conservative prudence is further retarded by vague fears of abuse of powers by elected bodies. Yet Kerala chose to follow an unorthodox and potentially risky strategy of big bang. Without a clear blue print it was a veritable leap in the dark on the basis of faith in people's power. A "series of reversals" followed – of conferring responsibilities and then building capacity, of giving powers and then creating procedures and administrative operating systems, of devolving funds and then setting up accountability mechanisms.

Hindsight shows that it was a wise and practical approach. As the devolution of functions, powers, funds and functionaries was effected all of a sudden within the space of nine months, the dissenters and doubters were overtaken by the swiftness of the operation; before the losers could get a sense of what they were losing it was all gone. And the firm political commitment by two successive governments of different political composition gave momentum to the process and conferred a kind of irreversibility.

Of course mistakes were made and deficiencies were there. But the change was stark and real. To bring order, after the big bang, Kerala chose the instrument of participatory planning for local level development. This succeeded to a considerable extent in harnessing public action in favour of decentralization, setting the agenda and forcing the pace. A campaign approach was followed resulting in high visibility and high expectations – the basis for participation and sound accountability.

Participatory Planning – What it is?

Participatory planning refers to the process by which the hitherto passive recipients of development become actors and governmental departments their agents both acting in coordination to identify felt needs and prioritize them as per the resources that can be mobilized through a social and political acceptable form of negotiation through the intermediation and supervision of elected local governments. In order to satisfy the canons of development planning there has to be infusion of professionalism preferably in a spirit of voluntarism so that people's ideas and expert opinion can blend seamlessly. And to ensure realism and definiteness, planning has to be against a budget revealed in advance fairly allocated and eked out by local resource mobilization. In such a scenario participatory planning becomes participatory budgeting.

In order to ensure that national and regional objectives of development get harmonized with local level needs and aspirations a framework is needed for participatory planning without being restrictive. And to channel the enthusiasm and energies of people into a proper development oriented action a process is required. Finally to make the whole exercise, legally and

administratively valid, the existing rules and regulations have to be suitably restructured to enable participation.

Why Participatory Planning?

Participatory Planning, as an entry point to decentralization, has several advantages. They include:

- i) Planning is relevant to all local governments, developed and under-developed, urban and rural, big and small.
- ii) Participatory planning facilitates the involvement of different sections of society each having different development interests and expectations; it affords opportunities for activists, volunteers and professionals to contribute to reconciling the different interests into a development agenda, in partnership with elected representatives and government officials.
- iii) Participatory local level planning throws up local solutions to difficult development problems unfettered by technological, institutional or ideological fixations.
- iv) It motivates people to back up their participation with contribution in cash, kind or labour, to stretch out public resources to match the requirements as per local priorities.
- v) Participatory planning implies local data collection and analysis facilitated by experts – this is a good base for reflection and developmental action, leading ultimately to empowerment.
- vi) It facilitates social accountability through enhanced information flow as well as awareness of deeper developmental issues.
- vii) Participatory planning generates the desire for developmental learning, affording entry to concepts like gender, social justice, environmental sustainability, mainstreaming the challenged and so on.

Participatory planning is only a beginning. If properly managed, it can lead on to a demand-led improvement of service delivery and further to responsible and responsive local governments.

Participatory Planning in operation

Kerala has succeeded in providing a practical methodology for participatory planning which attempts to balance the need for participation with the requirements of rational planning. Important stages of this methodology are outlined below:

- 1) ***Needs identification:*** Through a meeting of Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha, i.e., the ward or the electoral constituency of a Village Panchayat or Municipality Member, the felt needs of the community are identified. There is a period of environment creation to mobilize maximum participation in the Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha. Statistics reveal that about 10 – 12 % of the rural population has participated. The meetings are held in a semi-structured manner with plenary sessions and sub group sessions dealing with specific developmental issues. The decisions are minuted and forwarded to the Local Governments. Each meeting is chaired by the elected member and has an official as its Co-ordinator
- 2) ***Situation analysis:*** Based on the demands emanating from the first special Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha and based on developmental data, both primary and secondary, exhaustive Development Reports have been prepared and printed in the case of every Local Governments in the State. These reports describe the status in each sector of development with reference to available data, analyse the problems and point out the directions for further

development. This is an one-time exercise for a Plan period and the Reports have been revised before the Tenth Five Year Plan.

- 3) ***Strategy setting:*** Based on the Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha feed back and the Development Report, a one day seminar is held at the Local Government level in which participation of experts, elected members, representatives nominated by the Sabhas, practitioners from among the public is ensured. The development seminars suggest the broad priorities and general strategies of developmental projects to be taken up for a particular year.
- 4) ***Projectisation:*** The ideas thrown up by the above three stages are translated in the form of projects by Working Groups at the Local Government level. For each Local Government there are about eight Working Groups dealing with different sectors of development. Each Working Group is headed by an elected member and is convened by the concerned government official. The Vice Chairman of the Working Group is normally a non-government expert in the sector. The projects are prepared in the suggested format outlining the objectives, describing the benefits, explaining the funding and detailing the mode of execution and phasing of the project.
- 5) ***Plan finalisation:*** From among the projects, based on the allocation communicated, the concerned Local Government finalizes its plan for the year and this plan is submitted to the District Planning Committees (DPCs) through the Technical Advisory Committees. The Panchayat is free to take up any project, irrespective of its cost, subject of course to the resources actually available and within the sectoral limits.
- 6) ***Plan vetting:*** The Technical Advisory Committees at the Block or the District level consisting of official and non-official experts vet the projects for their technical viability and conformity with the mandatory government guidelines on planning and costing and forward them to the DPC. They cannot change priorities or projects; they can only ask for rectification.
- 7) ***Plan approval:*** The DPC gives the formal approval to the plans after which the Local Government can start implementation. It is to be noted that the DPC also cannot change the priority of a Local Government. It can only ensure that government guidelines are followed. Administrative approval for implementation is given project-wise by the Local Government. Every Local Government has unlimited powers of Administrative sanctions subject only to the limits of its financial resources.

Features conducive to social accountability in the Kerala model of decentralisation.

(1) Direct social accountability in Grama Sabhas/Ward Sabha.

As Kerala has relatively large Village Panchayats having a population of around 30,000 on the average it is a Ward or the electoral constituency of a Member, which is declared as Grama Sabha. (In urban local government it is a Ward Sabha). Meeting four times in an year focusing respectively on plan formulation, beneficiary selection, functioning of institutions and monitoring of development programmes, Grama Sabhas/Ward Sabhas are the basic fora of social accountability. To exemplify

- i) Suggestions for developmental projects emanate from these bodies.
- ii) All beneficiaries are selected by them.
- iii) The Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha has the right to seek justification of every decision and explanation for non-consideration of any of its suggestions.

iv) All accounts have to be compulsorily presented in the Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha.

(2) Focussed social accountability in stakeholder consultations.

Almost every section of society in Kerala is organized around an interest. Therefore to make up for the limitations of Grama Sabha /Ward Sabha due to lack of participation of the non-poor a system of compulsory consultation has been prescribed with different stakeholders like agriculturists, traders, industrialists, artisans, youth groups etc. to get their ideas on plan formulation. This process is gradually picking up. With proper guidance, it bids fair to be an important mode of citizen engagement on the basis of serious discussions leading to informed negotiations.

(3) Empowerment of women

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the decentralization experiment in Kerala is the evolution of a network and organization of the entire population below poverty line with each family being represented by a woman. At the base of this well knit pyramidal organization is the Neighbourhood Group consisting of 15 to 40 families at the local level, federated into an Area Development Society (ADS) at the level of the local government Ward and further integrated into a Community Development Society (CDS) at the level of the Village Panchayat and Urban Local Government. This powerful organization of women has grown into an extremely effective system not only for micro credit operations but also for micro level planning, for local economic development for providing community based social security and creating demand for improvement in service delivery. Unlike the rest of India the SHG movement in Kerala has been structured as the next step in decentralization and not as a power centre parallel to local governments. These active women groups have not only voice but the power of choice as well in so far as anti-poverty programmes are concerned. Their organizational structure facilitates both extension and feed back. Covering more than one-third of the population this highly democratic organization of the poor is a critical force in ensuring accountability especially in anti-poverty programmes.

(4) Diverse participatory fora.

The participatory planning methodology has succeeded in creating several participatory fora for the citizenry offering scope for formal intervention in the development process. At the local government level, Working Groups are constituted for different sectors of development to convert suggestions of Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha into projects. The Working Group consists of elected members and experts with the latter being defined as practitioners, officials, academics and activists. Before finalizing an Annual Plan a consultative discussion is held with different stakeholders from different walks of life in the Development Seminar. Similarly the Technical Committees for vetting of plans have several non-government professionals in them. In the case of water supply and irrigation User Groups plan, implement and manage utilities. Schools, Anganwadis and hospitals have all Consultative Committees.

(5) NGO partnerships.

Civil society groups are enabled to participate in the different fora mentioned above. In addition, formal partnership with NGOs is achieved through a process of accreditation which enables an NGO to carry out public works on behalf of local governments, outside the competitive tendering process. This ensures quality of public works in addition to accountability.

(6) Due process.

Due process is formally laid down for most of the dealings of local governments with the public. This is to avoid partisanship and arbitrariness. Without affecting the autonomy and freedom of local governments discretion has been defined. The best example is the process prescribed for selection of beneficiaries of the various individual and group oriented programmes of local governments. The local government has to first decide the eligibility criteria as well as the prioritization criteria in respect of the beneficiaries. This is to be shown in the project as well as in the application form for benefits. There has to be a process of application and verification of the application by a Committee set up by local government. The prioritization criteria should be assigned weightages in the form of marks out of 100 and the verification Committee has to award marks accordingly. The marks are read out in the Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha where almost all the applicants invariably come and the approval of this general assembly sought. In the case of beneficiaries, Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha is the final deciding authority and the local government cannot overturn the priority fixed by it. Further, all documents including the mark sheet are public documents available to everyone for scrutiny and copying.

(7) Watchdog system.

In order to ensure that the different forms of accountability are fully operational, independent watch dog systems have been designed outside the ambit of the executive. This is to avoid colourable exercise of power by the executive over the elected local governments which may belong to different political persuasions. The two important institutions performing the vigilance and corrective functions are:

a) Ombudsman.

It is headed by a High Court Judge (retired or serving) and has powers of looking into acts of malfeasance as well as non-performance of duty by local governments. It has the power to set right any wrong doing and punish those responsible.

b) Appellate Tribunal.

This is a semi judicial body manned by a District Judge with powers of hearing appeals from citizens aggrieved by decisions of local governments in exercise of their regulatory power (as different from their developmental power where the recourse is to be Ombudsman) like licensing, environmental legislation.

c) Performance Audit Authority.

In addition there is a kind of internal audit system to assist the local governments in maintaining their accounts and to oversee adherence to the due process. It is not autonomous but has freedom to carry out its activities. It ensures that accountability systems are properly kept and guidelines observed.

(8) Policy support.

Over the last 10 years, spanning four governments, there has been an unusual degree of commitment to the core principles of decentralization especially the idea of power to the people. In fact decentralization in Kerala can be summed up as an attempt to transfer power to the people through the local governments. This principle is central to all government policies vis-à-vis local governments.

Some of the specific policy initiatives furthering social accountability in local government are

a) Service Delivery Policy.

This is a policy which outlines the principles, processes and procedures relating to improvement of public services. It outlines several features of social accountability like citizen consultation, stakeholder participation in deciding improvements, social audit, continuous assessments of satisfaction levels through Service Citizen Cards, absolute transparency, publicized performance standards etc.

b) Social audit policy.

This is intended to institutionalize the practice of social audit which is now more informal and sporadic. It confers clear rights on citizens and service users to probe into the financial and administrative details of developmental action.

c) Policy on participatory monitoring.

A strategy for monitoring poverty through the NHG network of the poor has been approved. A massive training programme covering six persons per Neighbourhood Group is under way. Once this stabilizes it is expected to be a very powerful online assessment of different facets of poverty and public service levels by the poor themselves, which is then conveyed to Government and the local governments for follow up action.

(9) Enabling Environment.

Decentralization is a "process" and, in the initial years, it throws up several issues and challenges, many of them difficult to predict in advance. An enabling environment has to exist for these issues to be sorted out properly. The Campaign approach adopted for the people's plan helped creation of the proper environment. It made the people aware of the different aspects of decentralization, its potentialities and made them familiar with its processes and procedures. This was soon followed up by enshrining in the laws certain key features required for sustained public participation. Right to information was made absolute with practically every record being available to the public for scrutiny. Citizen Charters, simpler forms budgeting; enabling systems for community contracting as well as community running of public utilities have all been formally integrated into the local government system.

In order to respond to issues arising, a fast track mechanism called co-ordination Committee empowered to sort out all these issues has been functioning for the last eight years.

10. New Initiatives

In order to deepen the process of people's participation and strengthen accountability mechanisms certain new initiatives have been launched. They are summarized below:

1. In order to operationalise the Service Delivery policy, a Service Delivery project has been initiated in about 10% of the local governments and institutions transferred to them with the objective of identifying the different kinds of services expected of these local governments and institutions, assessing the present levels of service, prescribing intended levels of service and achieving the transition on a project mode.

2. The right to information is to be further strengthened by prescribing a series of compulsory disclosures including the format and language for disclosures. This is expected to be linked to a citizen education drive on the rights of citizens vis-à-vis local governments.
3. A new initiative has been taken up to forge a partnership between local governments and NGOs so as to achieve cooperation and synergies.
4. A project is under preparation to link social audit with formal audit. It is intended to achieve this through a pilot project with the involvement of experts from C &AG's office and MKSS, Rajasthan.
5. An initiative to revisit the Watchdog system to make the institutions more accessible and capable of speed in response has been taken up.
6. A series of action research projects have been initiated to try out different models and institutionalize the key features of decentralization. These include : -
 - a) Social audit
 - b) Inclusion of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
 - c) Mainstreaming the challenged
 - d) Moving on to gender and development from women in development
 - e) Improving methodology for participatory planning and monitoring
 - f) Revamping social contracting
 - g) Grievance redressal
 - h) Revitalization of participatory fora

There is a proposal to fully computerize the local governments and network them. About 15 software applications have been developed and procurement of hardware is about to be finalized. This is expected to improve transparency, and accountability and smoothen the interface between local governments and citizens..

Quick assessment of the experience so far.

The experience so far in participatory planning leading to greater social accountability can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Local Governments have performed very well in channelling funds to poor regions and poor groups of people. They have achieved considerable progress in poverty reduction. A recent experiment to reach out the poorest of the poor has brought out the capacity for care and compassion on the part of local governments, going beyond the conventional considerations of political gain.
- (2) Local governments have done very well in provision of minimum needs infrastructure – particularly housing, sanitation, water supply, electricity and facilities for anganwadis, schools and hospitals. Since all these assets are of direct and continuing benefit to the poor it reveals pro-poor development performance.

- (3) There is widespread public knowledge about the development programmes taken by local governments and the quality of their implementation. People seem to be acutely aware of the quality of decision making.
- (4) Participation in setting priorities is still considerable with attendance in Grama Sabhas hovering around 10% with poor women constituting the majority. But Ward Sabhas are ill-attended. Experience shows that people come to Grama Sabhas in expectation of benefits thus contributing to greater openness and fairness in selection of beneficiaries. But making general developmental suggestions and conducting social audit are rather weak. Since the poor participate in a large majority, there is no elite capture. At the same time the relative absence of the educated and economically active classes reduces the scope for wider social control of the development process. There needs to be an improvement in the quality of participation from demanding benefits to offering suggestions for overall development.
- (5) In the first few years of decentralized planning the poorest of the poor, especially the Scheduled Tribes, were not particularly benefited. This can probably be attributed to the peculiar social, economic and political situation of tribal areas where the tribals have been dispossessed and those who have dispossessed them are in a majority and continue their exploitative relationship by having greater political and economic power. An attempt to specifically empower tribals by giving tribal habitations, absolute control over Tribal Sub Plan funds is under way.
- (6) Social audit of a general nature has been taking place, particularly in Grama Sabhas and during course of implementation of development programmes. But specific social audit in the form of an informed group of people probing the accounts of local governments on the lines of "Jan Sunwai" has been very rare. Also, links between formal and informal accountability systems could not be established, even though it is stipulated that audit reports are to be discussed in Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha and the auditors should verify the minutes of Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha and other participatory fora.
- (7) While the right to information is absolute it is seen that it is not being exercised frequently. The power of even local governments can be quite intimidating further strengthened by the power of organized political parties.
- (8) NGOs have had an uneasy relationship with local governments. Most of them seem to be content to implement their own programmes without attempting to forge a partnership with elected bodies. There has not been a single instance of an NGO playing a constructive adversarial role in support of people's causes vis-à-vis local governments.
- (9) A very significant feature is that though the new checks and balances have had positive effects, there have not been many cases of public action against local government malfeasance. Generally people tend to wait till the elections where of course they have been decisive in enforcing accountability. This was most evident during the elections of 2000. Even those who had distributed a large number of benefits failed at the hustling if they were perceived to be unfair in their dealings. This fact seems to suggest several lessons for structuring social accountability systems.
- (10) By and large targeting of benefits has improved and selection of beneficiaries is fairer.

- (11) Though there are allegations of decentralization of corruption the assessment of knowledgeable people is that overall, corruption has come down but not dramatically enough to match expectations in the context of the new social accountability mechanism. It is felt that corruption levels are still above “comfort” levels but it is mainly due to the fact the old systems of public works execution and procurement have not yet been revamped to suit the new requirements. But considerable improvement is expected with the new initiatives taken up.
- (12) The watchdog systems do not seem to have had the expected impact on augmenting social responsibilities of local governments through strong pro-people activism. There is a widespread feeling that the procedures in these institutions need to be made more people friendly and quick results-oriented.

In sum, social accountability has increased considerably after decentralization. Participation in planning and understanding of local development programmes has increased. New and appropriate arrangements for social accountability have been brought out. Yet there is a long way to go before the institutionalization process can be completed satisfactorily.

Lessons from Kerala

The experience of Kerala in decentralization using participatory planning as the entry point has several interesting lessons which are summed up below:

1. Social accountability automatically increases with decentralization. It is the *raison d’être* of strengthening local governments.
2. Decentralization offers tremendous opportunities of basic governance reforms from below especially to make the governmental system responsive.
3. More than centralized governance decentralization offers greater opportunities for structuring the best features of social accountability. At the same time decentralization “*ipso facto*” need not lead to the social accountability mechanism becoming operational. There is need for active facilitation by government especially in the formative stages.
4. With decentralization there is tremendous increase in knowledge and awareness about developmental process and programmes. There is also better understanding of malfeasance and corruption. However this may not lead to any significant local public action. It is not as if people are putting up with wrong doing but they seem to wait and watch and strike firmly during the elections. But this delayed action however acts as an anticipatory deterrent on the powers that be.
5. The Kerala experience shows that for social accountability to be realized there is need for intense and continuous citizen education and creation of various fora for public participation.
6. Right to information is absolutely essential for social accountability but conferring the right and structuring arrangements for providing information alone is not enough. There has to be a citizen movement supported by committed individuals and civil society groups to access

the information. Also it is seen that there has to be a system of compulsory disclosures and that too in a form and manner understood by the layman.

7. There is a need for a link between social accountability and formal accountability systems especially auditing and vigilance.
8. Creation of organizations of the poor especially through the network of Neighbourhood Groups is a powerful system for bringing about comprehensive social accountability. However, it has to be carefully done as a part of the decentralization process and not as a system parallel to and competing with local governments for political and developmental space.
9. The existing systems of administration are of tailored for centralized governance. They all have to be reshaped to suit the needs of decentralization. Only then can social accountability be real.
10. Social accountability mechanisms are to be created at different levels and different stages right from identification of needs, through conceptualization of projects, selection of locations/beneficiaries, implementation, monitoring, up to evaluation and feed back for future refinement. Likewise social accountability systems are necessary in regulatory matters, developmental matters, welfare matters, civic services and other kinds of service delivery.
11. Capacity building is critical for understanding the concept of social accountability and operationalising it. It has to focus both on the citizens as well as local government functionaries both elected and official.
12. In order to improve the quality of social accountability, there has to be continuous learning and improvement. This can be achieved by providing flexibility for experimenting, innovating and developing models. Encouraging beacons to navigate uncharted areas at the extremes can be really helpful.

Questions thrown up by the Kerala experience.

Some of the questions relating to social accountability thrown up by the Kerala experience are briefly raised below:

- i. Does political accountability take away from social accountability? Is too much of party politics and party discipline restrictive of broader social accountability by dividing people on party lines and justifying partisanship and cronyism?
- ii. Do civil society groups have to function in opposition to political groups? Would strengthening of civil society mean de-politicization and weakening of rights consciousness?
- iii. Does downward accountability reduce the need for upward accountability? Also, does intensified upward accountability reduce the time and space for downward accountability, which is slower, fuzzier and time, and energy consuming.

- iv. Is there a trade-off between formal accountability mechanisms and informal accountability mechanisms? Is the principle of “more the better” relevant or should the principle of “choose the few carefully” be adopted?
- v. Does knowledge of facts, understanding of issues and awareness of underlying realities lead to public action?
- vi. Is public action the essential finale of social accountability? Can it stop short of it and achieve its objectives?
- vii. Is social accountability generally to the people at large or is it to interested groups. Is the latter form more intense and more realistic?
- viii. Can social accountability come up suo motu or has it be structured and facilitated by government?
- ix. Will too much emphasis on social accountability reduce project efficiency by frittering away resources and spreading thin on different local demands?
- x. Does social accountability mechanism develop fatigue and fade away?
- xi. Is micro level social accountability more realistic than macro level social accountability in the context of a local government?
- xii. Can social accountability so consciously structured for local governments ignite the demand for greater accountability to the people of higher local governments?

Conclusion.

Decentralization in Kerala has been consciously structured in such a way as not to roll back the state but to humanize it and roll it to the door steps of the citizens. It is an idealistic attempt to blur the distinction between the people and the government and offer scope for intervention to ordinary people in the public sphere to shape developmental programmes. It is an expression of the article of faith that social accountability will make the State more compassionate and caring and capable of equitable development – through synergetic partnership between the State and the citizen rather than conflict.

The Kerala experience teaches that institutionalization of social accountability is very much a necessity and it takes time, energy, commitment and expertise to design such systems, try them out, choose the best and sustain them.