



Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Disaster Preparedness and Management – Lessons from COVID-19 Pandemic

WEBINAR

Co-organized by PRIA International Academy
and National Institute of Rural Development
and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR)

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National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (NIRDPR) and PRIA International Academy co-convened a webinar on “*Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Disaster Preparedness and Management – Lessons from COVID-19 Pandemic*” on 24th April 2020.

In the past three decades, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India have confronted disasters like cyclones, earthquakes, floods, or droughts. However, a biological disaster like COVID-19 has never been experienced by these institutions since their constitution in 1992. PRIs have played a critical role in the event of Tsunami in Tamil Nadu and Kerala and earthquake in Gujarat. Panchayats are the most important institutions to deal with such disasters because of their constitutional mandate and proximity to the communities. Nevertheless, we need to ask the question of whether Panchayats are equipped with adequate capacities and resources to deal with such pandemics. The Disaster Management Act 2005 paved the way for the constitution of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) at the national level, State Disaster Management Authorities (SDMA) at the state level and District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) at the district level. However, the role of Panchayats and Municipalities in the Act has been reduced to “local authority”. The only representation of Panchayats is at DDMA level, where Zila Parishad Chairperson is the Co-Chairperson along with the District Collector. In the absence of a clear mandate for PRIs in disaster mitigation, preparedness, and management, the scope for institutional and human capacities building is also limited. The result is that at the time of a COVID-19 like situation in the country, with over 2.6 lakh PRIs and over 31 lakh elected representatives, Panchayats have limited capacities to deal with its impact on livelihood, health and nutrition, water supply and sanitation to maintain adequate hygiene and most importantly reverse migration.

The panellists for the webinar included Shri. Binoy Acharya (Founder Director Unnati, Ahmedabad), Adv.Smt. Thulacy (President, Kalady Gram Panchayat & President, Kerala State Gram Panchayat Association), Shri. Suresh Kumar Chhanga (Sarpanch, Kunariya Gram Panchayat, Bhuj, Gujarat), Dr. Aurobindo Behera (Retd IAS, Bhubaneswar, Odisha), Dr. Dilip Kumar Pal (Senior Project Led Consultant, NIRDPR), and Dr. Laveesh Bhandari (Founder Director, Indicus Foundation and The Unearth Bulletin, New Delhi). Dr. Rajesh Tandon (Founder-President, PRIA) moderated the session that was attended by 157 people from across India. The webinar focused on the following questions:

- *Are PRIs constitutionally and institutionally equipped with disaster management planning?*
- *What are the capacity building requirements of PRIs for disaster preparedness and management?*
- *What lessons can be drawn from COVID-19 situation to make the PRIs future ready?*

KEY MESSAGES

PRIs all over the country are estimated to support local social and financial requirements immediately and compassionately. However, the estimations are far from the reality due to the lack of capacities at the panchayats level. When the panchayats, local leaders, community members, and community-based organisations are empowered, they will be able to effectively and respond to the COVID-19 crisis. The key learnings from the webinar include:

- There is a need to strengthen disaster governance through inter-agency coordination
- Capacity building with respect to disaster management should start from the grassroots level in accordance with the National Disaster Management Act (NDMA) 2005.
- Panchayats should be equipped to act using their own resources to provide food, shelter, and support to the vulnerable even before directions from central or state governments are received.
- Panchayats have lacked the capacities and resources to act freely in the pandemic and due to ruled imposed by district, state, and central administrations.
- Community-based disaster management plans at the local level will help local bodies in acting rapidly and effectively in such disastrous situations.
- Integration of disaster management plan and Gram Panchayat Development Planning (GPDP) is essential.
- Increased role of panchayats in preparation of state or centrally sponsored schemes for community development is needed.
- Local-level disaster audits are important in the rapid response of the local bodies in a situation like COVID-19.
- Gram panchayats or the Self Help Group (SHG) based Public Distribution System (PDS) will ensure the food security of the rural poor.
- Shifting of regulatory power from state or district authority to gram panchayats is important to efficiently arrest the spread of COVID-19.
- Gram panchayats should put emphasis on developing own social capital.
- Support of the local police will help Panchayats in dealing with the pandemic in many parts of the country.

OPENING COMMENTS

Dr. Rajesh Tandon

(Founder-President, PRIA)

Dr. Tandon started the discussions by commending the response of Panchayats towards the nation-wide lockdown imposed due to COVID-19, even before the instructions from the central or state governments could reach the Panchayats. Several Panchayats mobilised local resources to support the vulnerable people in the area by providing food, shelter, and medical assistance. Most Gram Panchayats across India are now expected to respond to local social and economic needs urgently and humanely. But, their responses have been far from satisfactory because Panchayats lack institutional and human capacities to implement their disaster plans. The webinar deliberately aimed to reflect on the major challenges the Panchayats are facing in the present and deliver solutions for the ways in which the situation of panchayats might change in the future.



The foremost significant problem is the lack of a system, resources, and capacity to act independently due to numerous constraints imposed by district and state governments. Instead of being an institution of local self-governance, Panchayats have become field implementers of decisions made by state and national governments. The second is that most Panchayats do not have a database of migrants who live away from their villages. This makes the situation difficult, even more so once the thousands of migrants begin to return to their villages once the lockdown is lifted.

Lastly, though the PRIs are a three-tier integrated system starting from the village, block and district level Panchayats, they have remained largely ineffective due to consequences of ambiguous jurisdiction and unclear linkages. Despite the availability of the district planning committee as a constitutional mechanism for integrated planning of rural areas, most of the states have not made them functionally empowered.

The webinar aimed to discuss these challenges and how they impact the Panchayat-level planning and discover solutions to how these could be managed in the future.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Dr. Anshuman Karol (Senior Program Manager, PRIA) invited all the panellists and participants to participate in this discussion to share and learn about disaster preparedness and management of PRIs from the lessons learned from COVID-19. He also established the milieu and briefed the participants on the process of the webinar.

Shri. Binoy Acharya

(Founder Director Unnati, Ahmedabad)

Shri. Acharya highlighted the fact that the role of Panchayats is inadequately defined and left to be determined by the respective state governments. He explained that the Disaster Management Act had been divided into five sections, and in each section, several activities are planned. Establishing disaster governance through inter-agency coordination is necessary for rapid and effective disaster management. Understanding the risk in a disaster and the structural and non-structural investments in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) are essential to act appropriately. The capacity enhancement mechanisms from grassroots to the national level are vital to performing instantly. Shri. Acharya also emphasised that the Disaster Management Act has linkages to climate change and risk mitigation which is imperative in other disasters.



The Disaster Management Act explains the role of local agencies such as PRIs only briefly. However, the district disaster management authority needs to take the support of local PRIs at the grassroots level. Shri. Acharya, in conclusion, pointed out the necessity for the plans prepared in the Disaster Management Act to be feasible on the ground level.

Adv. Thulacy

(President, Kalady Gram Panchayat & President, Kerala State Gram Panchayat Association)

Adv. Thulacy elaborated on her experience in disaster management by Gram Panchayats in Kerala and how they have managed to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. She started her discussion by briefly describing the current situation of Kerala in tackling COVID-19. She explained that all 941 Gram Panchayats had developed community-based disaster management plans in 2018



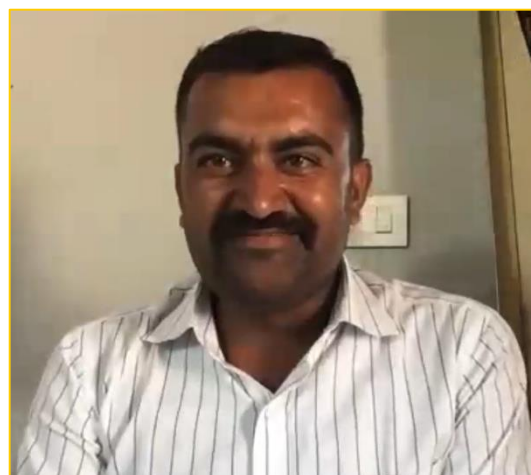
by collecting extensive ward-based data on shelter management, hospital infrastructure, technical resource persons, trained health workers, etc. This helped them act immediately in response to the pandemic. The support of local representatives, local committees, health department, police department, revenue department, and other community-based organisations was crucial in response to the pandemic affecting the state.

Adv. Thulacy also shared the responsibilities undertaken by the Gram Panchayats such as managing the community kitchens, ensuring home quarantines, and awareness generation. She emphasised on the importance of the GPDP with respect to the disaster management plan and the need to implement local disaster management mechanisms across the country. More monetary support from state and central governments to the local bodies is also crucial in dealing with future efforts to avert or respond to disasters.

Shri. Suresh Kumar Chhanga

(Sarpanch, Kunariya Gram Panchayat, Bhuj, Gujarat)

Shri. Chhanga drew attention towards the disaster management by Panchayats in Gujarat and how the learning they had from the Gujrat earthquake in 2001 helped them in COVID-19 management. He recollected his experiences and learnings from the earthquake and how these learnings helped Panchayats effectively respond to the pandemic by setting up community kitchens, quarantine facilities, spreading authentic awareness in the community, etc. Support of SHG groups, local committees, FLWs, etc. are significant in order to curb the pandemic. Shri. Chhanga highlighted the significance of



improving the capacity of Gram Panchayats in the preparation of Panchayat-level disaster management plans to act efficiently in response to a disaster. These plans must be integrated with the GPDP to ensure the development of disaster management plans by every Gram Panchayats in the country. He also suggested that similar to cleanliness audits or financial audits, a local disaster audit can also help the Gram Panchayat in disaster preparedness.

Dr. Aurobindo Behera

(Retd IAS, Bhubaneshwar, Odisha)

Dr. Aurbindo Behera reflected on the experience of disaster management by the government of Odisha. He shared that several capacity development programs to strengthen the Gram Panchayats were conducted after 1999 when a



super-cyclone affected the state. Today, the state Public Distribution System (PDS) managed by the Gram Panchayats and SHGs ensure the food security of the rural poor. Recently, the state government realised the significance of Gram Panchayats in dealing with COVID-19, and they disseminated the regulatory powers from the District Collector or Magistrate to the Gram Panchayat president. Now, the president has the regulatory power to make decisions on the lifting of lockdown, self-quarantine, movement of migrants, etc. in the Gram Panchayat.

Dr. Dilip Kumar Pal

(Senior Project Led Consultant, NIRDPR)

Dr. Pal furthered the discussion on whether PRIs are constitutionally or institutionally associated with disaster management planning. He underlined the fact that a majority of the Gram Panchayats are institutionally underprivileged despite being constitutionally enriched. Despite being institutionally frail, majority of the Gram Panchayats are involved in the battle against COVID-19 along with local committees, SHGs, community organisations, health workers, etc. Dr. Pal reiterated the need for integration of disaster management plan and GPDP because additional decentralisation of the Disaster Management Act and assimilation of Gram Panchayats are hard to ensure officially.



Dr. Pal highlighted NIRDPR's initiatives of capacity building of PRIs regarding disaster management. NIRDPR focuses on capacitating Gram Panchayats by dissemination of training and learning materials through local level training institutions. He also suggested that all states learn from the Kerala model of planning. Dr. Pal advised the local bodies to encourage education for the rural poor. Finally, Dr. Pal pointed out that the development of social capital at the local level is of utmost importance for rapid action in disaster management.

REMARKS FROM THE COMMENTERS

Dr. Laveesh Bhandari

(Founder Director, Indicus Foundation and The Unearth Bulletin, New Delhi)

Dr. Bhandari summed up by bringing up the need for police support for the panchayats to give the Panchayats the power to implement certain measures. Some tie-ups between them need to be facilitated. Further, he focussed on the importance of decentralised governance in situations of



crisis. The PRIs need to be given adequate power and funds to take over control of the school system and public health system at the village levels. The Gram Panchayats need to be empowered to carry out these functions efficiently, especially in light of the pandemic and plan for the coming three to six months when an upsurge in cases is predicted.

Dr. Anshuman Karol

(Senior Program Manager-PRIA)

Dr. Karol concluded with comments highlighting that Panchayat leaders should learn from each other, with the more experienced leaders guiding the newer ones. This will promote efficient and effective functioning at the grassroots level. He also recommended that the Gram Panchayat level health system be strengthened to face any disasters similar to how the cities are managing.



OPEN DISCUSSION

What will be the status of panchayat elections in Karnataka in light of COVID-19 as it is already due from the past 6 months?

In the present scenario conducting Panchayat elections is difficult not only in Karnataka but also in other states that are awaiting elections as there are various other priorities like economic and livelihood rehabilitation of the COVID -19 affected communities.

Does the Social Justice Committee (SJC) secure the interest of the vulnerable people in the community?

Though all the SJC committees are not active in the state, committees in the Kutch district in Gujrat play an important role in ensuring the interest of the vulnerable people in the community. The committee encourages MGNREGA workers to continue their job, following social distancing practices. They can also create a counselling centre at gram panchayat level for protect the mental health of the rural public.