

Village Assembly (*Goth Kath*) in Sindh, Pakistan

Ali Ahmed Jan*

Abstract

This paper reflects on the concept, functionality and roles of the village assemblies in the Sukkur and Khairpur districts of Sindh, Pakistan, under the newly introduced devolved governance system of the government of Pakistan. It covers the background of local institutions and the traditions of collective wisdom and action in various parts of Pakistan, and makes comparisons between new and previous approaches of collective action. It provides a rationale for the transformation of new institutions as a result of loopholes and lacunae in the traditional systems. The government and several international agencies have been making efforts in Pakistan to ensure the participation of local people in the development process. The author has focused on efforts made by Leadership for Environment And Development (LEAD)-Pakistan, under the project Democratized Education Management and Ownership (DEMO), to involve the local people in educational management through village assemblies. The role and functions of village assemblies in accessing quality education with the participation and involvement of the local people is the subject of the study

* Leadership for Environment And Development (LEAD) Pakistan
aajan@lead.org.p

Introduction

The Government of Pakistan has introduced a devolved local government system for involving the people in the planning and implementation of development initiatives at the grassroots level, through a well-conceived devolution of powers plan. The education sector, long ignored by beneficiaries, has become the topmost priority for the government and other actors under the devolution plan as a key to the socio-economic uplift of the masses. How to ensure access to quality education in the context of the devolved system of local governments in Pakistan has been a challenge for governmental and non-governmental agencies (NGOs). The US Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Education Sector Reforms Assistance (ESRA) has been supporting the initiatives for access to quality education in Pakistan through various governmental and non-governmental actors. LEAD–Pakistan (LP) is a member of the global LEAD family and network of people from various sectors like the government, NGOs, academia and media. LEAD – Pakistan is a partner in the implementation of the ‘Democratized Education Management and Ownership’ (DEMO) project in Sindh. LEAD realized the need to transform traditional institutions like *Goth Kath* into modern democratic forums like *Goth Kechery* (Village Assembly) that could respond to the emerging needs of society concerning the developmental aspects, as well as the socio-economic uplift of the common people. Another reason for this transformation is based on the fact that the traditional forums have lost recognition and acceptance by bureaucracy, feudalists and the educated elite at the local level. Therefore, stakeholders and partners appreciated the concept and philosophy of these new institutions that are formatted on the basis of the principles of democracy. The concept of VA is based upon traditional collectivism with space for marginalized segments and gender, which can further be revitalized, sensitized and improved to assume ownership of the services of development initiatives in the social sector (e.g. health and education) and enable the local communities to contribute towards the sustainability of the initiatives.

The background of Collectivism

The tradition of collective wisdom and action is as old as human history, but the concept of collectivism has changed with economic needs, social setups and geographic conditions. In ancient tribal and agro-pastoral societies, self-defense and joint attacks on enemies were the common factors that brought people of a particular area, tribe or watershed together. Custom dictates that people get together as a group for the cause of the common good, and to make collective efforts to resolve the issues that affect their lives. The tradition of collective decision-making has been transformed into modern democratic institutions in the civilized world. In Pakistan, collectivism is a centuries old tradition. This tradition has different names, functions and institutional setups—*jirga* in the Pushtoon culture. In a *jirga* all the tribes are given equal representation through their elders, locally called *maliks* (tribal chieftains) wherein the decisions are always made by a majority vote. In the tribal belt of Pakistan, the tribes still elect the *maliks* as their representatives for the National Assembly and senate with a limited right to vote. In Sindh, the issues are resolved in a *kachery* or *Goth Kath* (Village Assembly) where issues are resolved by the selected heads of tribes involved in the issues. The decision-making

part of the *kachery* is still known as *jirga* in Sindh. In Punjab, *Punchayat*, with a mandate of reconciliation, is a form of collective decision-making with representation from communities on a selective basis. In Northern Pakistan, the *Zaitu* system—community-based management of local issues on fixed terms and task-to-task basis is prevalent. The local forums are linked by culture, religious belief systems and traditions in the area where they operate. For example, in Muslim societies, the mosque is preferred as a central place to hold such forums but in pluralistic societies, other places are chosen for the maximum participation of various groups.

Apart from the common agenda of ‘reconciliation’ and ‘arbitration’, another common factor among all the traditional and local systems is their powerlessness and remorselessness in terms of money and legal authority in assuming these agenda. In some cases, these institutions have no legal recognition or authority, since provincial governments and the state’s legal agencies are already and simultaneously, in operation. All the successive governments in Pakistan have been dreaming about the decentralization of power to the grassroots level. Historically, the British rulers used the local institutions for their own interests since the arrival of the East India Company. As *The Fifth Report*, by Charles Metcalfe for the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company, in 1830, reads:

The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; Hindoo, Patan, Mogul, Mahratta, Sik, English are all masters in turn; but the village communities remain the same... If a country remains for a series of years the scene of continued pillage and massacre, so that villages cannot be inhabited, the scattered villagers nevertheless return whenever the power of peaceable possession revives. A generation may pass away, but the succeeding generation will return. The sons will take the place of their fathers; the same site for the village, the same position for the houses, the same lands, will be occupied by the descendants of those who were driven out when the village was depopulated...

The need for new democratic forums

In a traditional tribal setup the common man is never directly involved in decision-making. The marginalized segments and common people, especially women, are kept out of the power circles to ensure the ultimate authority of a few people who rule the whole society. Traditionally, Sindh society is agrarian, with all its characteristics still visible in rural areas. Usually the landlords and tribal chieftains have the ultimate authority and make decisions on behalf of their followers. As a result, the marginalized segments, especially women, have a limited role or no role at all in traditional forums. The traditional *Goth Kath* usually has no timeframe for holding its session/meetings and was always held when the need was felt, or when a conflict within the community or with another community arose. It has also been observed that the traditional *Kath* has not been involved in development issues and/or in making suggestions, in planning etc. Recently there has been a feeling that the traditional *Jirga* system is instigating conflicts and is

involved in contradictory issues like honor killing or *Karo kari* (A form of honor killing). Apart from the government's efforts to ban all forms of honor killing inclusive of *Karo kari*, there is a strong feeling among the educated liberal class against tribal conflict resolution methods and approaches in Sindh. Some intellectuals have gone to the extent of labeling the decisions made by *jirgas* in Sindh 'tribal terrorism' because of the consequences of the decisions that lead to clashes and fatal combats among individuals, families and tribes.

The Village Assembly (VA)

VA represents those who live in the village: members from village interest groups, village residents, and fraternity members are all represented. The VA is a forum/platform dealing with issues concerning school(s) and education in a particular area, and consists of stakeholders, parents, notables (influential people with repute) in the periphery of school(s), civil society institutions working in the area, government agencies, NGOs, political leaders and social activists.

Objectives

The overall objective of a VA is to promote social intermediation and develop social capital for the improvement of schools and the quality of education in the periphery. However, the specific objectives of the VA are to:

- Provide a common platform/forum for participation of all the stakeholders in the school(s) where they can discuss and resolve the issues in a shared effort.
- Foster the community's collective efforts for the common good, especially for the improvement of education in the area.
- Nurture, promote and develop community initiatives and institutions through a collective approach and self-reliance base.

The VA Session

A VA can be called to resolve an issue or a series of issues concerning the developmental, educational and social needs of the people living within the school periphery. In other words, a VA is a forum of stakeholders and beneficiaries including all the people living in the surroundings of a school or schools. The VA is called and conducted by the people with the approval of the majority.

To conduct the VA session the following are considered to be prerequisites:

- A VA is always called or summoned by a respectable person, notables or office bearers of the School Management Committee (SMC) or
- For a complete VA quorum, presence of the stakeholders (depending upon the size of the population in different villages and vicinities) is a must. Usually the VAs are attended by:
 - a. Parents (common people) of the periphery: at least one of the parents of at least one student from each class in the school.

- b. Schoolteachers: at least one, preferably the headmaster of the school
- c. The SMC representative is authorized to attend.
- d. NGOs (optional).
- e. Government officials (optional).

- The VA keeps all its proceeding and records available for the public.
- The VA communicates with the government and other agencies through SMCs or person(s) designated by the VA for the task.

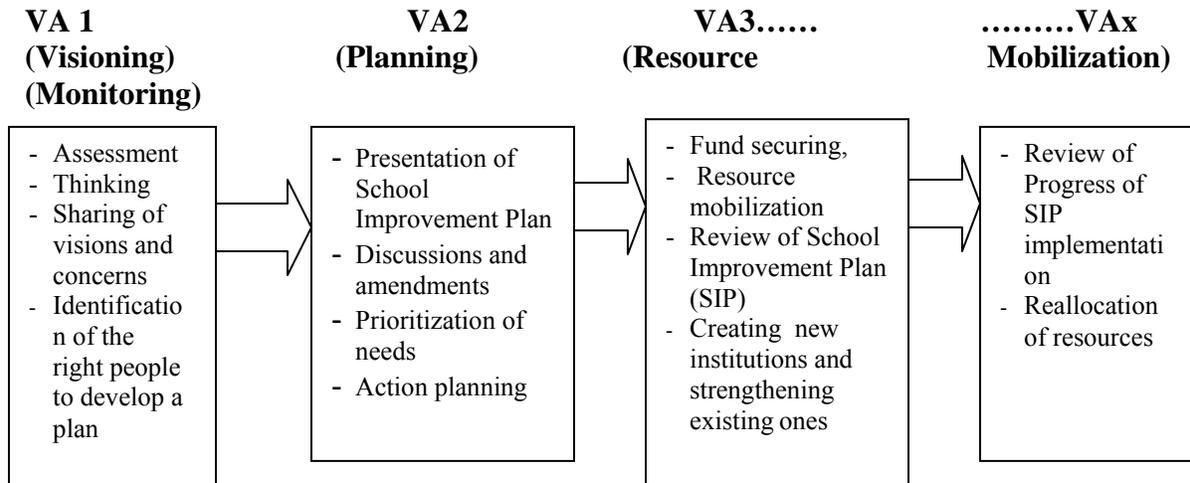
Modus Operandi

When a VA is summoned, a requisition is sent to the major stakeholders and community members for their participation, with an agenda to be discussed. Initially the VAs were called by the SMCs and the participants decided the next date for a meeting during the session and in case a date was not finalized, one or more than one persons were assigned the task of summoning the VA. The VA participants usually set a code of conduct for its meetings and a moderator or a facilitator maintains the order of the house. The code of conduct outlines the general matters of code of ethics:

- All the participants respect the opinions of others and listen to each other.
- The facilitator encourages the participants in participating in the discussions.
- All the participants address the facilitator and not each other or the audience.
- Religious, tribal and ethnic matters are not discussed in the assembly.
- The participants raise hands to respond to a question.
- The decisions are made in a democratic manner on the principle of majority rule by a show of hands.
- In the case of inconclusive findings, the issue is deferred to the next meeting or to a committee constituted by the assembly for the purpose of coming up with an acceptable solution.
- Female participants and elders are respected according to the Sindhi tradition.

The life cycle of the VA

The VA can be called for the discussion or the resolution of a specific issue or a number of issues, In the case of DEMO, the VAs have been conducted for visioning and planning of improved schools and for the provision of quality education in the villages. From the inception to the formulation of a School Improvement Plan (SIP), the VAs are conducted in series and each step defines the state of affairs or the progress of the task for which the VAs are conducted.



(Figure 1)

Visioning

With the help of a trained activist, the community develops a common vision for an improved school in the respective village by using different PRA tools. The visioning exercise helps the villagers in thinking about the quality of education through a better school environment. The key questions for visioning include, but are not limited to, physical facilities in a school (rooms, furniture, playground and toilets etc), teachers and other issues. The VA provides a common forum for teachers, parents and other key role players in a village or school vicinity to share their concerns and thinking with each other. During the first meeting the participants also identify and select capable people (community members and/or teachers) to develop a formal plan for school improvement.

Planning

A formal SIP is presented in the second VA (VA2) wherein the community reviews the plans jointly. Participants are encouraged to take part in the discussions and prioritize the needs mentioned in the plan. For timely implementation of the plan, the tasks mentioned in the plan are assigned to various community members in the presence of the participants. Community contribution in the form of material, time and finances is frequently observed in the VAs. Community members pledge their time, money and other resources voluntarily to improve the conditions of the schools for quality education in the villages.

Resource mobilization and utilization

Apart from community contributions during VAs, the community evolves a strategy for resource mobilization according to the SIP. The available and committed resources are discussed and allocated in the 3rd village assembly (VA3 in Figure 1). The

implementation strategy is devised to effectively utilize the available resources. A reporting and M&E mechanism with responsibilities is also devised to ensure accountability.

Participatory Monitoring

The VA undertakes the monitoring of its sessions through a review of progress and an assessment of future needs. Other stakeholders like donors, the Education Department and facilitating NGOs can also take part in the sessions as part of the participatory monitoring. During the session, participants ask critical questions and these are answered in a democratic manner.

Impacts

In the absence of a working democracy, participation of the local people in the planning and implementation of the development process has been a challenge for the transparency, accountability and efficiency of the process. The VA experience has been instrumental in ensuring the participation of people at the grassroots level.

Within a period of three to four months 1,061 VAs were conducted for the first time in the area and the same number of assemblies for the second time in three *tehsils* (Khairpur Mirs, Thari Mirwah and Kotdeji) of two districts (Sukkur and Khairpur). A total number of more than 51,000 people participated in the visioning and planning of schools at the grassroots level, including 1,900 women. Although the women's participation was less than that of the men, it was the first time that women were involved in the visioning and planning of schools. During these hundred days the local communities developed more than one thousand SIPs with a follow-up mechanism for monitoring implementation.

The way ahead

More than 6,000 VAs are planned under the DEMO project by the year 2006. In this way communities will be facilitated in developing 3,000 SIPs, with the training of 15,000 community activists in various basic management skills to strengthen the community initiatives at the grassroots level. Out of the 3,000 communities approximately 650 will be assisted in the formation of Community Citizen Boards (CCBs) and registration under the law. These CCBs will be legal entities and will also be eligible to access funds from governmental and non-governmental sources.

Conclusion

If supported and encouraged, VAs have the potential to provide a breeding ground for the nurturing of community-based institutions at the village level. On the one hand, VAs have the potential to act as general bodies for the local institutions, and on the other, these forums will ensure accountability and transparency in a democratic manner through the ownership of initiatives.

References

Annual Project Document of Democratized Education Management and Ownership. 2004. Islamabad: LEAD- Pakistan. (Unpublished)

Annual World Development Report, Making Services Work for Poor People. 2004. Washington: The World Bank

Annual The Next Ascent. 2002. An Evaluation of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program, Pakistan. Washington: The World Bank

Najam, Adil. 2000. *The Four C's of NGO-Government Relations.* Islamabad: LEAD-Pakistan

Websites:

Leadership for Environment And Development Pakistan. <<http://www.lead.org.pk>>

Office of the Community Development Rural Development US Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC. <<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ocd>>

Palas Valley Conservation and Development Project (PCDP)
<<http://www.palasvalley.org>>

National Rural Support Program. <<http://www.nrsp.org.pk>>
