

Voices from the Commons



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**Integrating effective community participation in the policy
process In India and beyond**

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Background

Common property resources (CPRs) often are one of the most common means of sustenance and livelihood for the poorest. Community land used for grazing, groundwater used for irrigation and domestic use, forest land for product collection, etc., are some examples of CPRs crucial for rural livelihood, but their management is often informal. There is extensive literature (Essa 2020; Cox et al. 2010; Rose 2002) on the type of institutions or rules needed for effective community management of CPRs. Government policies aimed at managing CPRs typically lack meaningful grassroots involvement, often adopting a top-down approach in their formulation. This results in the misalignment of grassroots organisations and communities from decision-making processes, particularly in policies concerning CPRs. However, to be inclusive, policies on 'commons' must be participatory and bottom-up in formulation, implementation, and evaluation.

Community and civil society organisation (CSO) participation in rural development (RD) policies is slowly gaining traction in India. Most policies, though, do not include them in decision-making at any level and primarily see communities as beneficiaries and CSOs as external agencies with little bearing on the policy process. However, recent efforts to increase people's participation in policymaking through initiatives like the Framework for Citizen Engagement in e-Governance (DeitY 2011) call for a translation to tangible processes and frameworks for community participation in the policy processes. There is, thus, a need for setting up institutional pathways for more effective community participation in the policy process.



Picture 1: Women at an MGNREGA work site in Alwar, Rajasthan.

Photo credit: Suchiradipta Bhattacharjee

In that context, two important policies are the Atal Bhujal Yojana¹ (Atal Groundwater Scheme/ABY) (Atal Jal n.d.) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme² (MGNREGS) (Mahatma Gandhi NREGA n.d.).

¹ Atal Bhujal Yojana (ABY) acknowledges groundwater as a common property resource and the management rights a prerogative of the local communities. From there on, the policy revolves around ways of building ownership and accountability within communities for participatory groundwater management supported by scientific and technical expertise and evidence.

² MGNREGA originated from the idea of the right to work with strong advocacy from civil society organisations. The work included manual labour engaged in asset building for natural resource management on common property lands in villages. Building water conservation structures in common lands through consensus and vetted by technical experts has been one of the most common activities of MGNREGA.

Community involvement is at the core of ABY, which envisions empowering the community to manage groundwater as a common property resource. For MGNREGA, while the core objective is "right to work", it also emphasises building durable assets³ for natural resource management on common property lands, with the community deciding the type of assets being built. The involvement of CSOs is also quite prominent at the implementation end of both schemes. While in ABY, CSOs play a key role in building awareness and enabling communities to make Water Security Plans, MGNREGS mandates 35% of the asset development activities (Keerthi et al. 2017; Sharma 2020; Mishra 2011) to be taken up by CSOs.

Interesting is the genesis of both policies. While the stressed groundwater availability became a concern for the Government, it was a parallel effort of the World Bank and Central Groundwater Board to introduce the Atal Bhujal Yojana. This initiative was based on their experiences and the learnings of CSOs from years of aquifer-based Participatory Groundwater Management movement in India. Further, CSOs' involvement in the policy consultations pushed the focus towards recognising groundwater as a common property resource and communities as its ideal custodian. MGNREGS, as one of the CSO representatives involved since before the genesis, states, "is a policy by the people, taken forward by people's movement." Ideated by workers' unions and drafted through extensive grassroots participation of communities, farmers, labourers, and CSOs during farm distress caused by severe droughts, it provides employment, durable assets, and entitlements.

It is important to note that both policies integrate community participation in concurrence with the Panchayati Raj System, the custodians of community lands and resources, and, in extension, of the CPRs. The three tiers of the Panchayati Raj System in India are devised to integrate democratic decentralisation in governance at the grassroots and bring the communities' ideas and grievances up the bureaucratic ladder. However, 253,000+ village Panchayats and their local context lose their nuances while moving up the national or state policy discussions. Given their proximity to the grassroots, CSOs are also one of the stakeholders most aware of challenges and opportunities at the community level, advocating for their rights and building awareness. Unfortunately, both find themselves often missing from policy design and decision-making.

Existing gaps and challenges – Problem statement

Policies in the RD domain require coordinated participation of public and private sectors and civil societies at national and state levels (OECD n.d.). Especially for the management of the commons, ensuring coordination and navigating grassroots-level power relations are paramount. It requires understanding diversities in the local context, differential access and capacities within villages, and multiple levels of structural systems for strategic capacity development to ensure good governance of the commons through policies. Policy spaces in that aspect are still restrictive in India, with very limited, if not nil, space for communities /CSOs at the decision-making table (Pandit 2006). This also restricts their participation in decision-making related to policy implementation, thus leading to faulty implementation, negative externalities, and a shift from the intended outcomes. As described aptly by Bishwadeep Ghose, Country Director, India at Water for People, "Right now, the feedback loop is not there. The state is primarily into policymaking while the district level is into implementation. But if we want to address policy blind spots in the top-down gaze of policymaking, then we need space for community voices that represent the complexities across India's diverse hydrogeology as well as demography. There needs to be a feedback loop with downward accountability to the communities. It should also address the information asymmetry at the grassroots and talk to the aspects of both community responsibility and entitlements."

73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution, 1992 (National Portal of India n.d.), created the three-tier Panchayati Raj System for ground-level decision-making considering the local context and diversity. While it serves the specific purpose of facilitating good governance and acts as a grievance-redressal system, the gap between local decision-making and translating that to policy decisions is unbridged. Imagined as the point of convergence and building coherence across policies and programs, they have been losing importance as "most policies and schemes have their own channel of implementation that doesn't always practically include the Indian Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)", as mentioned by a representative from CSO in Madhya Pradesh, India.

³ Asset development activity of MGNREGS: In addition to providing 100 days of work to each household, MGNREGS focuses on creating a productive rural asset base of prescribed quality and durability to strengthen the livelihood resource base of the poor.

Policymaking is a *partially* closed-door event (Basu 2019; Livemint 2021) in India taken up by a committee constituted by respective ministries owning the policy (figure 1). After the policy draft is revised internally, it is released into the public domain for open consultation, and comments are invited from the public for a specified period. Comments received are then integrated as seen by the drafting committee/Ministry. The draft is then sent for cabinet approval, and after being revised by a parliamentary committee, it is released as a policy. For those not part of the drafting committee, how much of the perspectives and suggestions are integrated into the policy document remains a matter of speculation.

Policies, even those that envision community participation with active CSO engagement as their goal, often have a limited seat at the table while designing those policies or their implementation. PRIs are often left behind because of their limited capacities to engage. Taking lessons from both the successes and challenges of ABY and MGNREGA based on extensive discussions in two states of India - Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, this policy brief speaks to the necessity and pathway for more effective integration of the community and CSOs in the policy process.



Figure 1: The policymaking process in India, starting with closed door drafting and then inviting public comments to ensure inclusivity of views.

Image source: <https://compliancebridge.com/policy-management-framework/>

Pathways for effective community integration in the policy process

Some pathways of achieving community participation in the policymaking process are discussed below (figure 2).

Formalising community/CSO participation to develop ownership.

To develop a sense of ownership among the communities in policies, especially in the participatory management of commons, they need to be at the decision-making table from the beginning. PRIs, a good model to be integrated into decentralised administration, in most cases, remain just as a partial grievance-redressal system (Gol 2019; MoPR 2021). Transforming this system to be part of active policymaking will be necessary to develop this ownership.

Similarly, including CSOs in the policy drafting committees from the get-go can be effective, given their extensive experience and knowledge. It might not be possible to accommodate 253,000+ sarpanches simultaneously in the policy consultation process, but in those cases, bringing in CSO representatives can ensure the representation of ideas and experiences from the grassroots and add an accountability mechanism to the bureaucratic process. Good examples to draw from are the experiences of MGNREGA and ABY. The former had a drafting committee with equal representation of CSOs, bureaucrats, and academicians, which consulted with people’s movements across states. ABY drafting committee constituted representation from CSOs, and the draft was sent to CSOs nationwide for their opinion.

Further, as the draft policies go out to the public domain for comments, currently, there’s no mandate to include the CSOs/Panchayats to engage with the process and provide their comments actively. It is rather left upon them to seek out the draft policies on online platforms (if they are aware of their presence) and provide comments. Instead, the policy drafts, translated to local languages, should be sent out to the PRIs with a mechanism to collect and integrate the feedback at the Zilla Parishad level, which is then taken up to the state/national drafting committee. While this does not ensure that the opinions and suggestions received are incorporated, they are still documented and can be referred to while drafting implementation guidelines.

Ensuring accountability through social audit

Effective community participation in the policy process and ensuring its long-standing participation also require accountability to and from the community. One way to effectively do this is by formalising the requirement of social audit by the community on policy implementation. There are examples from MGNREGS where a social audit on assets created is mandated. The idea of social audit was first introduced into MGNREGA and is also a contribution of CSOs to policy accountability. It was envisioned to ensure the involvement of the community in decision-making and developing a sense of ownership of the assets created because of the decision making, but also to keep the bureaucracy accountable for their rights.

Such mandates need to extend to all policies and should be linked to incentives for the effective completion of such audits. Also, to reduce corruption, there's a need to institutionalise mechanisms for more effective social audit units with CSO participation and faster recovery rates. Currently, the social audits that are present in certain policies are limited to monitoring and evaluation aspects only. Further, the initial idea of a community-led audit has shifted to an implementor-led audit, which might not be as effective. A more inclusive auditing process with community and CSO representation might be more effective in achieving the intended results.

Deliberate and targeted approach to capacity development

Another important aspect to recognise for community integration is acknowledging existing heterogeneity and not treating the community as a monolith. There are existing marginalisations based on caste, gender, and land ownership, among others. Community engagement often runs the risk of elite capture (Subash et al. 2019; Gupta and Mukhopadhyay 2015; Saito-Jensen et al. 2010), and to tackle the political realities and power imbalances at the grassroots, there are provisions reserving seats and allocating resources for certain marginalised sections (Balakumar and Maitra 2023). However, the inclusion of marginalised sections is often limited to just as beneficiaries (Kamruzzaman 2020). Even in cases where seats are reserved for marginalised sections, it is often token representation, for example, *Sarpanch Pati* (Anand 2017). One real challenge is that marginalised groups might need more focused awareness and capacity building, a lack of which often restricts more inclusive engagement with the community. Policies that envision community engagement need to provide space from the get-go for targeted capacity building. Also, it is important to acknowledge that spending time at training or giving time for community management and associated activities might be very expensive in terms of lost labour hours for the poorest. In that context, providing wages for the time spent participating in these capacity development activities might be effective.

Pathways for Effective Community Integration in the Policy Process



Figure 2: Pathways for effective community integration in the policy process

Ensuring accountability and ownership among the communities will require more than intent. It needs a coordinated, formal extension system active at multiple levels of administration (district, block, village panchayat, village) with trained personnel to identify the diversities within village communities and their felt and unfelt needs, the ability to strategies appropriate community mobilisation methods for those sections, and sustainably mobilise communities. Community mobilisation requires a considerable investment of time and resources. While one-time training can be good for sparking an interest or generating awareness, collective empowered participation will require more systematic engagement with communities, which can be better achieved by an effective extension system. A good example, in this case, can be the extension model followed by agriculture and allied sectors (Rasheed 2012), Farm Science Centres/Krishi Vigyan Kendras⁴, and the ASHA workers (NHM n.d). of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Dedicated personnel functioning at multiple levels of central and local administration until Panchayat appointed volunteers dedicated to a certain development department to continuously engage with the community members, make them aware of new and ongoing events, and mobilise them for decision-making and management.

Conclusion: Adding a multiplicity of lenses in decision-making

Challenges in policy implementation in India, particularly the gaps between policy intentions and on-ground achievements, have been persistent. Key issues include:

- *Discrepancies between anticipated and actual grassroots conditions:* Well-crafted policies often fail to reflect on-the-ground realities.
- *Necessity of diverse stakeholder involvement:* Effective policymaking requires input from end users, boundary organisations, researchers, academics, politicians, and practitioners throughout the process— from agenda setting to monitoring and impact evaluation.

Initiatives like the Framework for Citizen Engagement in e-Governance represent promising beginnings. However, these initiatives remain limited in scope, primarily focusing on e-governance. Expanding such frameworks to encompass broader public policy domains, both online and offline, is crucial.

National policies face the dual challenge of maintaining a broad vision while integrating local nuances and contextual learning to avoid pitfalls during implementation. A practical approach to achieving this balance includes developing detailed implementation plans that specify how broader recommendations will be carried out, identifying responsible stakeholders, and defining their roles.

Grassroots stakeholders are crucial for integrating local insights into policy frameworks. By examining successful policies in India that incorporated community engagement, we can:

- *Extract valuable lessons:* Analyse varying levels of success and challenges to improve implementation.
- *Provide practical guidelines:* These insights can inform policymaking in other contexts as well.

⁴ KVK or Farm Science Centres, a key part of the National Agricultural Research System (NARS), evaluates and demonstrates location-specific agricultural technologies. Acting as Knowledge and Resource Centres, KVKs support public, private, and voluntary sector efforts to boost district agricultural economies, connecting NARS with extension systems and farmers.

“ "There needs to be a feedback loop with downward accountability to the communities. It should also address the information asymmetry at the grassroots and talk to the aspects of both community responsibility and entitlements." - Bishwadeep Ghose, Country Director, India, Water for People.

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Endnotes

The policy brief draws from the interactions with communities in four districts, each of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, civil society organisations, government institutions in policy implementation, and academics and researchers at a national level.

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