Decentralised Planning and the Localisation of Sustainable Development Goals: Empowering Women Through the Lens of Pris

Dr. Ramprasad V. Pole

Faculty, YASHADA, Pune MS

Abstract:

The debate on governance has been increasingly acknowledges the importance of decentralisation as a tool to democratise planning, enhance local accountability, and promote holistic development. Within this framework, decentralised planning not only serves as an administrative construe but as a transformative strategy aimed at deepening democracy and achieving sustainable development at the grassroot level. Consequent upon, the institutional quintessence of decentralisation is found in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), which have emerged as critical platform in linking national development agendas with local aspirations, particularly in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The localisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has emerged as a critical policy imperative in the global pursuit of inclusive and sustainable development. Women empowerment i.e., SDG 5 (Gender Equality) in connection with socio-economic, development political participation and leadership, health and education remains fundamental concern out of these 17 global goals.

In this setting, this paper examines how decentralised planning through the PRIs enables the localisation of SDGs. Notwithstanding the significant presence of women in local governance structures, questions remain about the nature of their participation in the decision-making forum to accelerate gender-sensitive development within the broader SDG framework. The primary objective of this study is to analyse the role of PRIs in promoting the localisation of SDGs through decentralised planning processes, while assessing the target 5.5. under SDG-5 to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

Keywords: Decentralisation, Localisation, Participation, Empowerment, SDG

1. Context and Research Setting

The Local government is an important forum which plays a vital role in operationalising the principle of *"leaving no one behind"* by taking governance closer to the people and ensuring need specific and inclusive service delivery. Their closeness to the communities allows them to address local needs more effectively and efficiently, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised communities. The introduction of decentralised governance through the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment Acts have institutionalised rural and urban local self-governance, respectively, mandating the devolution of 29 subjects related to socio-economic development to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs)

Government of India, 1992)[1].

These 29 subjects comprehend critical sectors such as health, education, economic development, agriculture, sanitation, water supply, poverty alleviation, and women and child development etc, are directly aligned with the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) and various UNDP assessments, 15 out of the 17 SDGs fall within the functional domain of local governments in India. The two exceptions—SDG 14 (Life Below Water), which pertains to the conservation of marine resources, and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), which focuses on global cooperation and financing—are largely beyond the jurisdiction of local governance structures (UNDP India, 2021; MoPR, 2020)[2].

The XI Schedule of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, defines 29 subjects to be devolved to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), among which women and child development figures prominently. The constitutional mandate of reserving 50% of seats in Panchayats for women has been a landmark reform in promoting gender equity in local governance (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2021)[3]. Complementing this, various legislative and policy interventions have sought to enhance women's rights and socio-economic status. These include targeted schemes providing income-generating assets, and initiatives focusing on women's health and nutrition. Flagship programmes like the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) have further empowered women through the formation and strengthening of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which have proven to be transformative in enhancing women's agency and participation in public life (World Bank, 2020)[4].

However, despite this development, the extent of change remains uneven across states and within regions. The potential of SHGs to challenge entrenched socio-cultural barriers has not been fully realized. The tenacious conventional gender stereotypes continue to undermine women's substantive participation in local governance. In many cases it has been observed that, the phenomenon of "proxy representation" or the dominance of *Panchayat patis* (husbands of elected women representatives) continues to undermine the spirit of democratic decentralization (Kishwar, 1996)[5]. The political participation of women in Panchayats has not always translated into effective decision-making power, pointing to the need for deeper socio-political engagement and institutional reforms that go beyond numerical representation (Rai, 2011)[6].

In this setting, this paper examines how decentralised planning through the PRIs enables the localisation of SDGs. The primary objective of this study is to analyse the role of PRIs in promoting the localisation of SDGs through decentralised planning processes, while assessing the target 5.5. under SDG-5 to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

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1.2. Objectives

The central objective of this study is to:

1. To analyse the role of PRIs in promoting the localisation of SDGs through decentralised planning processes, while assessing the institutional mechanisms that enable or constrain the empowerment of women within these frameworks.

2. Specifically, it aims to examine the target 5.5. under SDG-5 "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life".

1.3. Methodology

The study was conducted in Gulaljhariya Gram Panchayat, located in the Sonbhadra district of Uttar Pradesh. Adopting an exploratory research design, the study draws on both primary and secondary sources of data to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with elected representatives of the Gram Panchayat, complemented by a focused group discussion with members of a local women's Self-Help Group (SHG). Secondary data was sourced from a range of materials, including academic books, journal articles, credible websites, and newspapers. The study employs qualitative data to enable a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation.

2. Decentralised Planning and Localisation of SDGs

Decentralisation is broadly recognised as a cornerstone of multilevel governance reform, offering a strategic pathway for enhancing the delivery of public services and fostering inclusive development. It necessitates a simultaneous strengthening of intergovernmental relations, local institutions, civil society, and public sector capacity (World Bank, 2021)[7]. By enabling more effective planning, implementation, and feedback mechanisms, decentralised governance supports both equity and efficiency imperatives in development administration (Arcidiacono & Torrisi, 2022)[8].

In Indian context, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), through the constitutional mandate has been strongly advocated for inclusive development, social justice, and grassroots democratic governance, and achieving these objectives are central to the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India. As witnessed, a significant number of the SDG targets fall within the purview of the 29 subjects devolved to Panchayats under the XI Schedule of the Constitution. This alignment places PRIs deliberative platform to localise and implement the SDG agenda effectively.

To reach out maximum and interpolate the governance, decentralised planning is a critical method to attain the sustainable development goals, which empowers the local governments to address specific community needs effectively. By prioritising local input and control, decentralised planning supports targeted actions that are more relevant to the local conditions of a community. The localisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) necessitates more than just applying global targets at the local level. It requires setting local agendas, making decisions, and monitoring progress with locally adapted indicators to ensure meaningful participation and ownership by local actors (Tan et al., 2019)[9]. Localisation emphasizes the crucial role of

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[7] World Bank. (2021). Decentralization and Service Delivery: Moving from Theory to Practice.

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local governments in implementing SDGs, as they are closely connected to the community and well-positioned to tailor initiatives to local realities (Bednarska-Olejniczak et al., 2020)[10] **(Halko et al., 2023)[11]**

2.1 Localisation of SDGs through Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP)

The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) has emerged as an important institutional mechanism for executing decentralised planning. A framework to reflect local needs and priorities through participatory processes, the GPDP provides a robust mechanism to integrate SDG targets into the planning and implementation. Aligning GPDPs with the SDG targets not only ensures greater coherence between local development and national commitments, but also enhances the accountability, responsibilities and effectiveness of development interventions.

Acknowledging the role of local government to localize Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) effectively through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), strategic planning and action through Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) plays a vital role. The comprehensive planning frameworks are mandated to be developed by Gram Panchayats (GPs) to align with their specific needs and priorities before allocating funds from the Fifteenth Finance Commission (FFC) award (Chinnadurai et al., 2024)[12]. It is in this context, under the leadership of NITI Aayog and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR), a significant collaboration among 26 Union Ministries has been initiated to further emphasize the localization of Sustainable Development Goals (LSDGs) (ibid.)[13] These collaborative efforts aim to ensure that SDG targets are seamlessly integrated into local development plans, fostering an inclusive and participatory approach at the grassroots level.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Progress and Reflection on SDG 5 in India (Engendering Development in village)

In the recent past, India has initiated milestone policy making toward promoting women empowerment through targeted schemes and legal frameworks visioning at improving women's access to education, health, access to financial services, and political representation. The government's important initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, Mahila Shakti Kendra, and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) are few have aimed to enhance women's agency and economic participation. The institutionalisation of representation of women in local governance (PRIs) through one-third (and in some states, up to 50%) reservation under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has contributed significantly visibility in grassroots governance. These measures have laid the foundation for gender-inclusive development planning in rural areas.

Nevertheless, the translation of these mandate into perceptible outcomes at the village level remains uneven and complex. Despite positive developments and outcomes, the challenges to achieving SDG-5 in rural India remain significant. These include violence against women, disparities in wages, restricted mobility, and underrepresentation in decision-making processes beyond symbolic representation. Often,

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[10] Bednarska-Olejniczak, D., Olejniczak, J., & Svobodová, L. (2020). How a Participatory Budget Can Support Sustainable Rural Development—Lessons From Poland. *Sustainability*.

[11] Halko, A., Mäntysalo, R., & Purkarthofer, E. (2023). Engaging the United Nations' Agenda 2030 in strategic governance of "Europe's most sustainable city". *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development*.

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[13] Ibid.

elected women representatives in Panchayats functions under the influence of male family members (commonly referred to as 'proxy' representation), which undermines the spirit of political empowerment envisioned under SDG-5.

3.2. Locating the vulnerability of Women in the study Panchayat

Despite the implementation of various developmental scheme and measures by both the central government and state government, gender differences in Uttar Pradesh remain persistent. There are several factors attributed to this enduring gap and one of the crucial factors is the patriarchal mindset deeply prevalent among a large section of the population. There are prominent disparities in education, employment, and health outcomes across different social groups in Uttar Pradesh. While the State Planning Department report reveals that the state has been progressing in field of health and education, financial access to public institutions more particularly in the district which is declared as aspirational district. The reports al concludes that the are still substantial challenges remain particularly in reducing infant mortality, improving nutrition, enhancing sanitation, and creating sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Inaccessibility to public Institutions: As observed access to healthcare was a major challenge in the Gram Panchayat, especially for women. As appraised by the elected representatives, the risk of maternal mortality was alarmingly due to the prevalence of unsafe home deliveries. This was more often than attributed to the long distance to the nearest primary health centre, as a result women were reluctant to go for institutional deliveries, often resulting in adverse outcomes.

Lack of access to financial institutions: Although a number of SHGs had been formed initially in the Gram Panchayat, they soon became inoperative due to internal disputes, lack of mentorship, and absence of adequate handholding support. Women from the marginalised sections were more vulnerable as they found themselves excluded from accessing financial institutions, further limiting their avenues for economic sustenance.

Non-participation of women in democratic dialogue: Participation of women in public life, especially in local governance, remained negligible. Their participation in development activities in terms of decision-making and panchayat meetings was remarkably low. Many felt that even when they raised important concerns, their voices were ignored, leading to a deep sense of disempowerment and disengagement from the democratic process.

4. Field Insights-Development intervention through Decentralised Planning

Realising the multifaceted challenges faced by women in the panchayat concerning the limited economic opportunities, poor access to healthcare, disempowered in the shared spaces, and vulnerability to domestic violence, the Pradhan took initiatives to enhance women's overall well-being and agency. The significant strategies are involved empowering women economically, encouraging their active participation in local governance, and improving their access to essential services. To meet these conditions, the Pradhan fixed the targets by taking the cue from the Sustainable Development Goals, and thelocal targets set for women Empowerment by Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GoI. In order to improve the situation, the panchayat was adopted the following targets to make the panchayat women friendly.

- Improving women access to livelihoods and increasing the income of women.
- Participation of women in public life (Socio-Political)
- Ensuring safety of women from domestic violence

4.1.Enhancing Economic Empowerment through Livelihood Access

One of the primary factors often resulted to the failure of operation of SHGs was the proxy participation of women, wherein male family members, particularly husbands, exercised control over the microcredit loans extended to women. As narrated by the village Pradhan, few years ago, men would often use the loan amounts acquired through SHGs for their own purposes while leaving the responsibility of repayment to the women. This phenomena undermined both the financial autonomy of women and the sustainability of the groups.

Taking a lesion from the past mistake, the Panchayat undertook a series of corrective measures intended to strengthen women's access to livelihood opportunities. A strict regulation was instituted to prevent unwarranted male interference in SHG functioning. Simultaneously, efforts were made to re-organise and mainstreaming the inoperative SHG groups through renewed access to microcredit facilitated by stronger bank linkages. By introspecting the intersectionality of gender, social norms, and economic exclusion during the Mahila Sabha, the Panchayat created a framework through mentoring the marginalised and previously disengaged women first. These women were connected to the State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM), where they received training related to group formation, financial management, and entrepreneurship. Remarkably, concerted efforts were made to bring out the women those who were once confined within their traditional household roles to participate in income-generating activities.

This was a major shift in women's participation in local economic structures. The panchayat's intervention not only catalysed the formation of functional SHG groups but also helped alter prevailing gender norms, thereby creating space for women's collective action and economic empowerment.

This case from Gulaljharia highlights how grassroots leadership and locally tailored interventions can revitalize defunct institutions like SHGs and foster inclusive, sustainable livelihood opportunities for rural women.

4.2.Mainstreaming Women Participation in Panchayat Activities

In several occasions, it was observed that in the panchayat women remain largely excluded from decision-making processes, often act as passive participants or proxies for male relatives. This tendencies of proxy politics and power brokerage frequently dislocate genuine female leadership, especially in the planning and implementation process. Concurrently, women from marginalised communities, the challenges are further doubled by the intersection of caste and patriarchy, resulting in a dual burden of discrimination.

In response to these structural barriers, the panchayat implemented a series of innovative, community-based interventions aimed at mainstreaming women's participation in political, economic, and social spheres of governance. One of the most forward step was the conception of a community cadre system, a locally embedded mentoring mechanism designed to mobilize and support women's groups. These cadres work closely with elected women representatives (EWRs) and grassroots collectives, not only to build their capacities but also to curb the influence of male relatives attempting to act as de facto decision-makers on behalf of women leaders. To institutionalize women's voices in governance, the panchayat also introduced the Mahila Sabha to identify and discuss gender-specific concerns. The outcomes and suggestions from these Mahila Sabhas are integrated into the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), thereby formalizing the input of women in local planning. Furthermore, the panchayat has made deliberate efforts to ensure women's inclusion across all standing committees of the Panchayat. This strategic move has enhanced the scope of women's influence in decision-making, particularly in schemes and programmes targeting gender-specific needs.

4.3.Ensuring Women and Girl Children Safety

Factor influence to domestic violence was identified as the widespread consumption of alcohol and use other intoxicants. The use of alcohol had far-reaching consequences in terms of domestic violence against women. By realising the gravity of the situation, the Panchayat adopted a proactive and multi-pronged approach to address the issue holistically. Under the leadership of the *Pradhan*, a **'Nigrani Committee'** (Monitoring Committee) was instituted with certain norms and regulations to curb the influx of alcohol and intoxicants into the village. The committee actively monitored the entry points and collaborated with the local residents to prevent illegal supply and distribution of alcohols and intoxicant, especially from areas outside the Panchayat's jurisdiction.

simultaneously, a village level Counselling Committee was created to engage directly with individuals identified as alcohol-dependent or habitual perpetrators of domestic violence. These community-based interventions aimed to rehabilitate rather than only penalize, emphasizing behavioural change through regular counselling sessions and community accountability. Further reinforcing this initiative, the Panchayat institutionalized a formal interface between the Mahila Police and the Mahila Chaupal, creating a gender-sensitive grievance redressal platform. Through monthly meetings, women were encouraged to voice concerns, seek legal awareness.

5. Conclusion

The important initiatives undertaken by the Panchayat reflect a strong alignment with the core principles of decentralized planning and the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). By transcending women's economic empowerment through SHGs, improving access to health care, and institutionalising participatory platforms like Mahila Sabha, the Panchayat has fostered inclusive governance and social equity. These efforts have not only enhanced the socio-economic status of women but have also curbed patriarchal practices such as proxy representation. The Panchayat's holistic approach grounded in local needs and participatory planning has created a women- and child-friendly ecosystem, earning state-level recognition such as the Chief Minister's Award in 2023. This case exemplifies how grassroots governance, when responsive and gender sensitive, can drive sustainable development in line with the SDG framework.

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