

Facilitating the Panchayat task force: a stepping stone to community mobilisation



CENTRE FOR WORLD SOLIDARITY (CWS)

Trócaire has had specific programmes on improving local governance response to issues of social justice through community mobilisation in Koraput, Kandhamal and Rayagada districts of Odisha, India since 2011. This work has contributed to an important need in the district, as many sectors of society have been socially excluded from government programmes and social security entitlements. Women from tribal and Dalit communities have been particularly discriminated against, and their social exclusion has been further exacerbated by the inadequate functioning of governance structures at the local level. The structures within the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), India's system of local government, in particular the hamlet and village level meetings known as the Pallisabha¹ and Gramsabha² were not functional.

In 2011, in cooperation with 8 partner organisations³, Trócaire's partner CWS started an innovative 4 year "Panchayati Raj Institution, Good Governance and Social Justice" programme. The programme draws on key Acts for advocacy purposes to ensure the proper

BOX 1:

The Panchayats Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act, 1996 (PESA) is a unique legislation in that it provides radical governance powers to tribal communities and recognises their traditional community rights over local natural resources. According to PESA, a habitation or a group of habitations or a hamlet or a group of hamlets comprising a community can manage its affairs in accordance with traditions and customs and shall have its own Gramsabha. It not only accepts the validity of customary law, social and religious practices, and traditional management practices of community resources, but also prohibits the state governments from making any law which is inconsistent with these. Though this act was passed two decades ago, it is not implemented in Odisha because of a lack of by-laws and a lack of political will to change this. Similarly existing Panchayat laws had to be amended for special provision in schedule areas. Tribals are still deprived of ownership on natural resources, and self-rule in scheduled areas.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchayats_\(Extension_to_Scheduled_Areas\)_Act_1996](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchayats_(Extension_to_Scheduled_Areas)_Act_1996)

¹ Pallisabha - Village and hamlet level meetings for all villagers to attend as part of India's system of local governance.

² Gramsabha - a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level.

³ Eight partner organisations - EKTA and Koraput Farmers Associations (KFA) in Koraput; LNSRD, FARR & OPDSC in Rayagada; and JAGRUTI, SWATI and Maa Ghumura Yubak Sangha (MGYS) in Kandhamal districts. Though the project commenced with 8 partners, due to some compliance issues LNSRD left in January 2013 and MGYS left in January 2015.

enforcement and tracking of social security programmes and schemes and supports communities to assert their rights and entitlements in 218 targeted villages of 16 Panchayats⁴. The key Act that committees draw from is the Panchayats Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act, 1996 (PESA) – see box 1 for further details of this Act.

Village Development Committees (VDC) were formed in each of the 218 villages. In order to exert pressure at

higher levels of government, **Panchayat Task Forces (PTF)**⁵ were also formed and strengthened. Members of Panchayat Task Force were drawn from the VDC. Members of the VDC include duty bearers (ward members) within the local governance structure – the Panchayat Raj Institution, and therefore some of these are also included on the PTF. The purpose of including elected representatives (panchayat level government official) within the structure was to increase the sustainability of the group and to strengthen leadership.

Diagram 1: Structure and Roles of Community Based Organisations

		STRUCTURE	ROLES
POPULATION COVERING 2000-10000 VOTERS IN AREA	PANCHAYAT TASK FORCE (PTF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Executive Body: 25 - 30 members (50% women – 50% men) 1 or 2 members from each Village Development Committee nominated to PTF. Executive Body meeting – Bi – monthly 16 PTFs are in the project area Officer Bearers – President, Secretary and supporting members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying and prioritizing common/specific concerns of villages for discussion at Gram Sabha Deciding course of action and assigning tasks to various groups of people Networking/Engaging with local government authorities Developing leadership Highlight violations of PESA, encourage enforcement of provisions in Panchayat governance in order to strengthen transparency and accountability of public institutions.
	VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE (VDC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All the adult members of the village are members of the VDC Executive Body - 7 to 15 members (50% women – 50% men) Executive body members are nominated or elected in the village through democratic process. The ward member (lowest local government representative) is also a member. Officer Bearers – President, Secretary and supporting members Executive Body meeting - once a month The President presides the meeting and the Secretary records minutes. The Secretary informs (either in writing or through a messenger) the members about the venue, date and time of the meeting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying and prioritizing common/specific concerns of villages for discussion at Gram Sabha Respond to different issues focused on addressing the needs of the community and specific vulnerable subgroups such as minorities, women or children. Monitoring of existing schemes and services at village level Deciding course of action and assigning tasks to various groups of people Developing leadership In case the problem is unsolved the VDC member who represents the PTF puts the issue in the bi-monthly meetings.

⁴ Panchayat - a village-level statutory democratic institution of local self-government that has been given constitutional status under 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian Constitution.

⁵ Panchayat Task force - The mandate of the Panchayat Task force is to voice against the violations of PESA and call for enforcement of inbuilt provisions in Panchayat governance for transparency and accountability of public institutions. It is an autonomous unregistered body not controlled by any external agencies.

Purpose of Community Mobilisation Process

During the VDC and PTF meetings, communities discuss issues they are facing such as delays in the implementation of different government schemes. Specific issues discussed also include misappropriation of rice under the food scheme (Public Distribution System), delays in wage payment under rural job schemes, delays in settlement of claims of land under the Forest Rights Act 2006, irregularities in the food distribution in child and mother care centres and primary schools, absenteeism of teachers and staff at child and mother care centres, alteration of beneficiary lists for government provided housing schemes. In addition to these, VDC and PTF committee members also focus on strategies to increase women's participation in local governance meetings and to provide spaces for women to articulate their priorities in these meetings (such as addressing alcohol consumption in communities, children's education, road provision, drinking water, housing and sanitation facilities). Members of the VDC are considered "go to" people for any problems that affect either the entire community or certain individuals/ families. The PTF plays an active role in representing issues in local governance structures such as the Gramsabha, as well as during social audits and other public hearings.

The China Clay Struggle:

Malikhudubi village and four other adjoining villages in Kumargandhana Panchayat, Lamtaput Block, Koraput District were affected by pollution from the mining of china clay by a private company. The company had not received approval from the Gramsabha to start mining the village resources. The villagers had discussed the issue in the VDC meeting and also tried to discuss it with the private company without success. The issue was therefore brought to the PTF meeting and a separate meeting was organised by concerned PTF members on 23 June 2011 on people's rights, which included representatives from 70 neighbouring villages and local elected representatives. As a result of this meeting, a People's Memorandum was prepared and endorsed by those attending. The PTF submitted the memorandum to the District Collector who contacted the Deputy Director of Mines and directed him to start the legal proceedings against the persons involved in the illegal mining. The mining activities were subsequently stopped in the area for some time. In 2013, a new

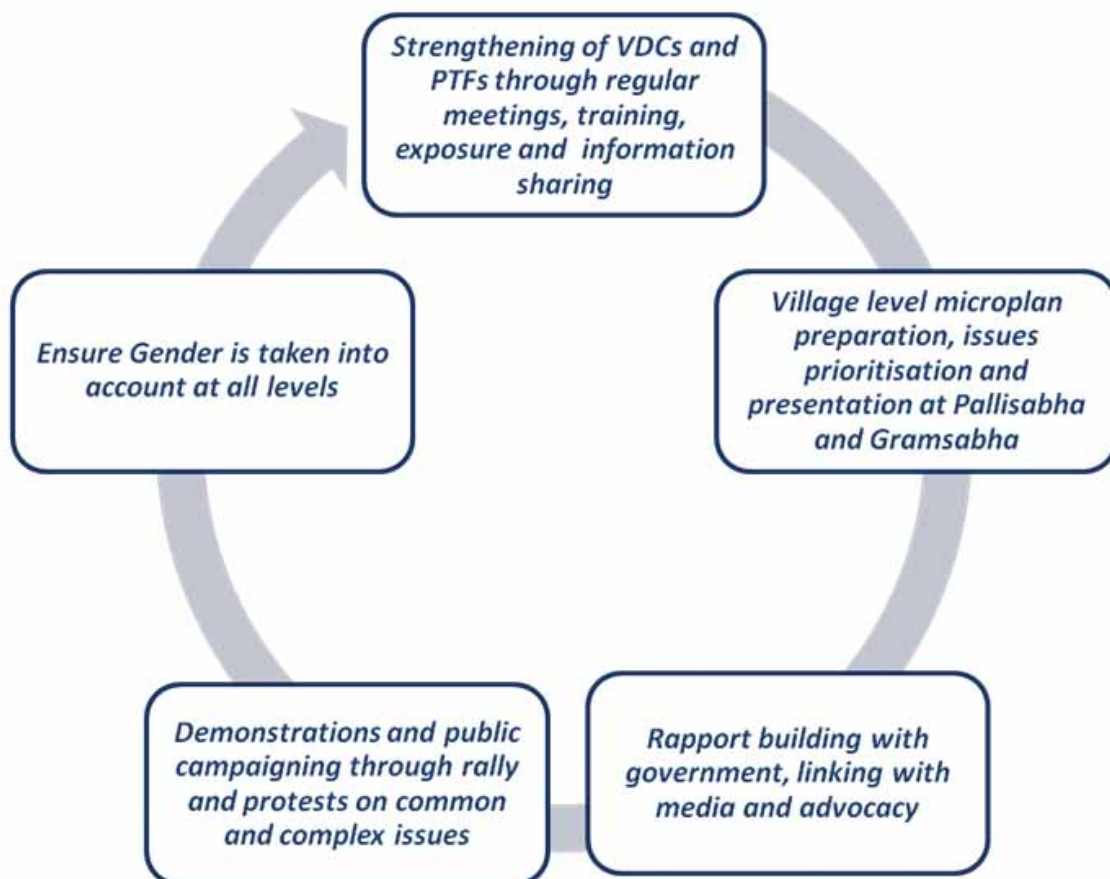
District Collector was appointed and started the process of reopening mining work in the same area, informing the villagers that the mining work should start. The villagers witnessed a large police force approaching the mine and decided they should protest against the decision of the District collector. 600 villagers including women and children obstructed the road so the police vehicles were unable to pass. The police men repeatedly persuaded and threatened the villagers, but they remained steadfast in their protest. Eventually the police were left with no other option but to turn back. While the villagers have been successful in protecting their local resources, they remain fearful that those in power will try again to access the mine. Seeing that the new District Administration was in favour of allowing a private company to mine in the area, the PTF decided to file a case in the High Court using the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act to prove that tribal population rights in the area had been violated. They have also used the Right to Information Act to request further information on the situation, which they are still waiting for. One of the Task Force members from Kumargandhana Panchayat stated "We have filed a case in the High Court but the advocate has not been given dates of the hearing. It is also difficult for us to get to Cuttack frequently in order to attend the court procedures." However the PTF will persist using these legal means to keep the china clay mining company at bay.

BOX 2: PANCHAYAT TASK FORCE:

Often during community mobilisation processes, government representatives are not included in core committees. However, in the Panchayat Task Force, it was decided that locally elected representatives should be included on the core committees. Through being part of the committee, elected representatives have gained additional information which has strengthened their role in the community. They are regular participants in the VDC/PTF meetings and through this process they have gained increased knowledge of local issues, and also increased their commitment and capacity to address issues on behalf of their community. It has been observed that the local elected representatives are some of the most active members on the VDCs and PTFs.

Strategies used for strengthening the Panchayat Task Force for community mobilisation:

The diagram below shows the five core strategies used within the programme.



Impact as a result of community mobilisation strategies:

Increased women’s voices and participation in decision-making structures:

Women are attending committee meetings, Pallisabha and Gramsabha meetings regularly and also raising issues at different levels of government. Many women have increased knowledge about their entitlements and have lobbied for these for themselves and on behalf of other citizens in the local area. There has been a specific focus on addressing the needs of single women, through ensuring they have access to government schemes such as state pensions, the National Family Benefit Scheme and housing schemes. Some of the active women There

members have also demanded drinking water facilities in the villages, sanitation facilities, and resources for meeting halls for women self-help groups.



▲ Rama Devi a woman leader of Partomaha panchayat, Daringbadi

⁶ A Sarpanch is an elected head of the Panchayat (village government) in India

Women Sarpanchs⁶ have been raising issues of migration, trafficking of women and children though in a subdued and a cautious manner. Ms. Gandhari Pradhan the Sarpanch of Partamaha in Kandhamal district said that she presides over two monthly meetings on the 1st and the 16th of each month and discusses all issues in the Panchayat, including services provided at the school and the child care center and issues of women’s condition and position. This is certainly a great step forward.

has also been an increase in women running in local elections – and in many areas more women have put themselves forward for election than men, even in areas where there are no specific reserved seats for women. CWS believes this is a result of a number of strategies, including: having 50% representation of women on VDCs and PTFs; ensuring that at least one duty bearer position within the committee is held by a woman; holding regular discussions and activities with men in the community to address negative attitudes and perceptions towards women leaders and regular training and exposure programmes for women to increase their knowledge and confidence as leaders.

The women of Adasuga village explained that they would like Surabati Pradha, their present elected representative, to continue in the next election, even if the seat is not reserved for a woman, as she had genuinely worked on the issues of people. They also believe that women leaders are more accessible to them.

At the beginning of the programme in 2011, data was collected on levels of awareness of laws and rights, participation in decision making structures, action of communities on different rights and entitlements. The same data was again collected in 2014. The table below reflects the changes in women’s attendance, participation and involvement in decision making in different committees and village meetings.



▲ PTF meeting at Gochhapada, Phiringia Block, Kandhamal

Strong leadership developed:

There is a remarkable increase in the engagement of community at different levels of government to address specific issues. This is largely a result of the work of the VDCs and PTFs who have taken a proactive role in planning, monitoring and supporting the implementation of government programmes and schemes. Communities and individuals have benefitted from the provision of irrigation channels, ponds and land levelling of individual plots of land as per village plans. A number of women have been elected within the local governance system and women from VDCs and PTFs are now representing women specific issues at various platforms.

There was provision for piped drinking water supply for Padmapur Panchayat. This was entrusted to the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS), Government of Odisha. The Government dug the borewell and then they declared that the tube well was damaged and stopped the work. Members of the PTF met the RWSS Executive Engineer and pressurised him to restart the work. They dug

Table 1 – Women Participation in different committees, Pallisabha and Gramsabha

	Attendance at Committee meeting		Attendance at Pallisabha and Gramsabha		Decision Making		Political Participation	
	2011	2014	2011	2014	2011	2014	2011	2014
Women	Scarcely 10% of adult women members attending	More than 50% participation of women members in the community are attending	Usually Pallisabha and Gramsabha was not being convened	More than 70% of women participate in palli sabha.	Women were not a part of the meeting	Women are part of decision making and expressing women specific needs	33% per cent women seat reservation was kept in panchayat system but women were not running for election in reserved seats also.	More than 60% women running for PRI election and even for unreserved seats

another borewell and again declared it defunct. The PTF met the department again with grievances and said that this was a heavily populated Panchayat and there was an acute shortage of water, so they must identify the right spot and restart work, or they would stop the National Highway traffic. Under the pressure of the PTF the spot was identified, government land was allocated and the borewell was dug and now the work has been successfully completed. The Panchayat will soon have piped drinking water for about 300 households.

Improved governance accountability:



▲ Village development meeting at Pujariguda panchayat

Prior to this project, many villagers were not aware of their rights and entitlements and did not see the value in participating in local decision making processes as they felt there was no space for discussing their specific needs. Through gaining increased knowledge and information, villagers are more aware of their rights and are exposing issues and gaps within the government provisions. Local government is now being held to account by local populations. Through conducting regular social audits, using the Right to Information Act, and through the use of media and other advocacy activities, the local governance system has improved. Previously, village meetings such as the Pallisabha were rarely held but it is now a regular occurrence as it is being driven by the Panchayat Task Force.

Challenges:

Panchayat Task Force not recognised by many government officials:

The Panchayat Task Force is an informal, unregistered body at Panchayat level. As a result of this status, some government officials have refused to address the grievances put forward by the PTF.

The Block Development Officer of Tikabali, Kandhamal District was outraged when the PTF submitted written complaints of the defunct tube-wells in Guttingia Panchayat. He stated that PTF is not a registered body hence they should not come with that identity. A small representative group of PTF members met the District Collector in Phulbani and give a complaint letter by written regarding defunct tube-well. The Collector marked the letter to Block Development Officer to take needful action. As a result within a week the defunct tube-wells were repaired.

PTF leaders can be misled by people with other vested interests:

Some community leaders who gain knowledge and skills through the programme have been targeted by vested interest groups. One example is during election campaigns, PTF members can get swayed by political parties and contribute to their campaigns. In such cases the leaders no longer serve the whole community and do not necessarily focus on the key issues of the most marginalised people in the community. While this is an ongoing challenge, CWS and its partners have continued to highlight this issue with PTF leaders in order to try to mitigate against it.

Staff rotation:

Retaining staff in remote, inaccessible rural areas has been an ongoing challenge and has become even more challenging in areas where there is increased Maoist insurgency.

Maoist movements:

Maoist movements in some project locations has temporarily hindered the pace of intervention and it remains an ongoing challenge.

Using skills and knowledge gained:

Community members sometimes forget what they have learnt in trainings, or they lack confidence to highlight irregularities to higher government officials.

Lesson Learnt



There is an urgent need to take advantage of the reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj Institution system, through supporting women's empowerment. Women leaders have immense potential as well as the willingness to carry forward their constitutional tasks, but they often lack the skills and support. There is an urgent need to work with them to ensure inclusion of women in the programme.

The Panchayat Executive officer (PEO)⁷ of Gutingia Panchayat in Tikabali Block of Kandhamal District had been ineffective in the Panchayat for many years. Previous Sarpanches had been unable to handle him. He had even begun to stay in the Panchayat premises, and was in an inebriated state most of the time. Ms Manini Pradhan, the Sarpanch of Gutingia Panchayat decided that she did not want a drunken man who was unable to work as her PEO. She passed a Gramsabha resolution supported by the women in the Gramsabha, to hire a new PEO. Manini has also been felicitated as the one of the best women Sarpanch by the District administration.

The composition of the PTF has stood the test of time:

Within the PTF are both women and men, including local government elected representatives and motivated citizens. Given the inclusiveness of the task force, they are able to provide a strong check and balance in the Panchayat and the PTF is now recognized as an effective and useful body by Panchayati Raj Institution officials. It may be useful to further institutionalise the PTF with a set of written rules.

Extensive training of PTF members but room for improvement:

While there has been numerous and extensive training courses for PTF members, the level of women's participation in these training courses has been lower than expected. There is a need to analyse the reasons for this and to devise strategies to increase women's participation in these courses. There is also scope to ensure a more participatory training curriculum for PTF members.

Micro level planning is the key to transparency and accountability:

Village level plans which are developed in a participatory manner through Participatory Rural Appraisal and other social research techniques has helped ensure inclusive development in the community. If these plans are revisited at regular intervals, it will help them to be even more effective and inclusive.

▼ Social Mapping Kidramala Village for Micro Planning



⁷ The Panchayat Executive officer (PEO) is appointed by government at the Panchayat level to assist the Sarpanch in administration. The PEO assists the Panchayat in recording decisions, keeping minutes, preparing budget estimates and reports, and does other sundry jobs like preparing notices, explaining circulars, organising Gramsabha meetings, etc.

BOX 3: ROLE OF CWS AS A FACILITATOR

CWS, as a facilitating organisation, selected small partner organisations who had a direct presence in the project locations and had a rich experience of community mobilising work. CWS helped partner organisations through providing training, exposure visits, IEC materials and supported partner organisations through regular (biannual but more if necessary) monitoring and field visits. Flexible financial support from the donor organisation was also a contributory factor in achieving results.

Conclusion:

CWS and its partner organisations have experienced varied degrees of success in the 'Panchayati Raj Institution, Good Governance and Social Justice' project in the last four years and ten months period. CWS and its partner organisations have gained a huge amount of experience and insight during this programme through working with local communities and supporting

their empowerment journeys. Through collective mobilisation, CWS has witnessed communities holding their local government to account and setting irregularities right. However, the fruits of strengthening the PTF can only be expected after CWS and its partner organisations withdraw their support. It is heartening to note that some of the PTF leaders have showed increased confidence to take up their issues independently of supporting organisations. The PTF is not registered yet but some of the PTFs are contemplating registering themselves so as to increase their identity and recognition at different levels of government. This PTF model can be replicated by other organisations who work with local communities. Panchayats can also promote this structure.

Shri Surya Kanta Mallick, the President of Paburia PTF, Tikabali Block, Kandhamal district says 'All the inputs and confidence we got through this period will never be in vain. We will use these for the betterment of disadvantaged individuals/families henceforth. We have been already recognised by the Panchayat and Block level government. Hence this process will be continued'

Contributed by:



CENTRE FOR WORLD SOLIDARITY (CWS) - ODISHA RESOURCE CENTRE

283, B-Duplex, Kalyani Plaza, Po: Patrapada, Bhubaneswar-751019,
Tel. No. 0674-2471514,
Email ID: orc@cwsy.org
Website: www.cwsy.org

Photo Credit: CWS



Trócaire India Office
S-30, Phase-II, Maitri Vihar Road
Maitri Vihar, Bhubaneswar-751023

www.trocaire.org