

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) to Support Democratic Decentralisation in India

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Sida Evaluation 02/39

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Report to SIDA, New Delhi, on the work of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) to Support Democratic Decentralisation in India

This report consists of two parts.

Part One contains an analysis by a external consultant, based on a two-week visit to India (including one state, Madhya Pradesh), on much additional reading of documents, and on the findings of the two-member Joint Review Team which visited a further four states over a longer period.

Part Two contains the much more detailed report of the Joint Review Team.

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Abbreviations

CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
JRT	Joint Review Team
LSG	Local Self Governance
MoRD	Ministry of Rural Development
NCRSOs	Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organisations
PICs	Panchayat Information Centers
PRIs	Panchayati Raj Institutes
PRJA	Panchayat Raj Jagrukta Abhiyan
PRCs	Panchayat Resource Centers
PRIA	Participatory Research in Asia
PEVAC	Pre Election Voter Awareness Campaign
RSOs	Regional Research Organisations
SHGs	Self Help Groups
SIRDs	State Institutes of Rural Development
SRCs	State Resource Centers
ToR	Terms of Reference
ULBs	Urban Local Bodies
VDOs	Voluntary Development Organisations

PART I: THE EXTERNAL CONSULTANT'S ANALYSIS

1 Introduction

These comments, by Professor James Manor, focus on the work of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) and its regional partner organisations in support of democratic decentralisation in India. This analysis is based on studies of PRIA documents, and extensive discussions with its leaders and with representatives of several of its partner organisations at the state level. It is also based on a field study of the work of one of PRIA's stronger partners (Samarthan) in Madhya Pradesh (a state with strong *Panchayati Raj* institutions or 'PRIs'), and on the much more detailed studies by the Joint Review Team (JRT) in four other states, which is set out in Part Two.

2 The Three Investigators' Consensus in Support of PRIA's Work

The External Consultant endorses the findings and recommendations of the JRT, to be found in Part Two. We all agree that PRIA's work has been quite successful on all of the fronts where it is active, and that it richly deserves continued funding. Indeed, its work deserves to be expanded. SIDA should continue its support, and it might consider encouraging other agencies to provide additional funding. Let us briefly consider the investigators' consensus in a little more detail.

2.1 Pre-Election Work

PRIA's (and its partners') pre-election efforts to raise awareness, etc., are novel and have had a significant impact. The printed materials produced are of high quality and intelligibility. The development of cooperative relations with government agencies is an admirable achievement, and has magnified the programme's impact.

2.2 The *Panchayati Raj* Awareness Campaign (PRJA)

This effort succeeded impressively in reaching PRI members and citizens involved in *Gram Sabhas*. It provided a crucial complement to government efforts which tend to be too top-down. Solid results were achieved in capacity building, knowledge enhancement, and policy advocacy. Training materials produced were of high quality. Perceptive adjustments were made to distinctive conditions in different states. Both intensive and extensive approaches are warranted, and the latter might be expanded (experimentally) in partnership with government agencies. Experiments might also be attempted to reach out to (a) people from outside the disadvantaged groups rightly stressed by PRIA, and (b) some promising parallel bodies (user committees).

2.3 Work in Support of *Gram Sabhas*

PRIA's work here has again been very effective and deserves expansion. Efforts to stimulate involvement by other civil society organisations should continue and should expand. So should efforts to persuade lower-level bureaucrats to support this work and *Gram Sabhas*.

2.4 Micro-Planning

PRIA's work here has been quite successful. It might redouble efforts to persuade government agencies to support and facilitate micro-planning.

2.5 *Panchayat* Resource Centres (PRCs)

Success here owed much to the proactive work of PRIA activists. Their numbers might be slightly expanded per PRC. Strengthening efforts at block level might yield great benefits. The work of the PRCs might be extended to cover parallel bodies in some places.

2.6 Urban Governance

A cautious expansion of PRIA's admirable efforts here is warranted. Special attention should continue and intensify on concerns that have both rural and urban dimensions.

The rest of Part One consists of comments on a few aspects of PRIA's work which are not fully covered in Part Two.

3 Should PRIA Work in States that Lack Strong PRIs?

In states with ‘strong’ PRIs – where they have been given substantial powers and resources – PRIA and its partners have good reason to be active. Such systems are very likely to work well and to yield greater responsiveness, transparency, accountability, etc. In the large number of states with ‘middling’ PRIs – where their powers and resources are disappointing but significant – there are still good reasons to be active. Such systems can achieve enough to justify PRIAs’ efforts. The tough question concerns states with ‘weak’ PRIs.

The JRT investigated two states with weak PRIs – Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. They found that in these states PRIA had been able to accomplish enough to justify continued programmes. This writer is acutely aware that as long as these two (and some other) state governments starve PRIs of powers and resources, PRIs will be substantially crippled. So PRIA’s work in such states must be justified on other grounds. By acquainting ordinary people and elected members of PRIs with what *panchayati raj* is supposed to be like (and is like in many states), PRIA can generate grassroots demand for it and trigger people’s exasperation with government that could cause many to become more active in the public sphere. That, plus PRIA’s work to draw civil society organisations in these states into work with PRIs, will strengthen civil society as a constructive force in public affairs – an important goal. And PRIA’s efforts will prepare citizens for the day when PRIs in these states are given greater powers and funds. Both of these state governments have in the past year shown that they feel pressure from citizens and donors to do just that – and the central government is also intensifying pressure. So it may well happen. For all of these reasons, it is probably worth persisting with efforts in ‘weak’ states – while considering whether greater emphasis on ‘strong’ and ‘middling’ cases might be justified.

4 PRIA's Relationships with Other Organisations

PRIA has a shrewd understanding of its own limitations and of the strengths of other organisations, and it sensibly tailors its work accordingly. This may mean that another organisation receives most of the credit for an achievement, but PRIA is interested mainly in results. For example, it recognised that the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI, with its world headquarters in New Delhi) had far more experience in addressing 'access to information' issues than it did. It therefore decided that it was best to encourage CHRI to take the lead there, and it supported CHRI in areas where the latter requested it.

PRIA also understands what other organisations are doing in support of PRIs, and again, it tailors its own efforts to complement these. One other group playing a very prominent role in this sector is the Institute for Social Sciences (ISS) in New Delhi. PRIA knows that ISS excels in advocacy work and in documentation. It does not ignore these areas in its work, but it is content with an informal division of labour here, with ISS taking a more prominent role. PRIA's engages in advocacy, but since ISS takes aggressive stances in the media and the courts, PRIA sensibly stresses a complementary approach – quiet diplomacy with government actors who are unlikely to listen to more forceful public critics at ISS. PRIA also works to document the workings of PRIs. But it produces material based on evidence gained from its own activities – evidence that only it can fully understand – rather than trying to duplicate the more wide-ranging work of ISS.

Another example of PRIA's good judgement in dealing with other organisations is found in its varied approaches to PRIs in different Indian states. It wisely uses two criteria in deciding what activities to pursue: (1) the varying capacities of its *partner organisations* in different states (with which it sensibly holds extensive dialogues – which we find to be effective – every six months), and (2) the varying degree to which PRIs have been empowered and funded by different state governments.

One last comment – which is so obvious that it might go unnoticed – is worth making. Many civil society organisations in India have been slow and reluctant to recognise the importance of PRIs. They have done far less to support PRIs than they should have done. PRIA seeks to correct this by demonstrating that useful work *can* be done, and by actively encouraging other civic organisations to get involved. This is extremely valuable.

5 Three Useful Insights from PRIA

PRIA deserves credit for at least three acute insights which inform its support for decentralisation. The *first* is its decision to concentrate some of its efforts in small and medium-sized urban centres. Rural areas will always receive plenty of attention in a country where two-thirds of the population resides there, and large cities and municipalities will also not be ignored. But small and medium-sized towns and cities could easily go largely unnoticed – indeed, we know of few studies of or efforts by civil society organisations in such places in India other than those done by PRIA and its partners. PRIA has rightly seen that such urban centres interact crucially with the rural sector in which it also works, and that to ignore them would be unwise.

Work in those urban centres often brings PRIA and partners into close touch with key bureaucrats overseeing decentralisation in both urban and rural areas. Many of these centres are also district headquarters, where crucial decisions are made within the decentralised system – something which many donors and Indian NGOs (but not PRIA) fail to recognise. PRIA knows that this gives it the chance to lobby quietly with these influential people for modest but important changes that can substantially affect decentralisation.

The *second* insight is PRIA's emphasis on making information accessible to all. Rather surprisingly, few Indian NGOs have grasped the extraordinary importance of this. But this is stressed both in the mission statements of PRIA and its partners, and in their work. The evidence from our field investigations suggests that they tackle this issue effectively.

As PRIA's name suggests, it is very adept at using participatory techniques. But it has also come up with a *third* insight in this vein – that there are limitations on what such techniques can achieve. This speaks well of PRIA's capacity for learning from self-criticism, and is highly unusual among Indian organisations using participatory techniques.

6 A Well-Crafted Experimental Approach and Rigorous Self-Criticism

We have clear evidence to indicate that PRIA and its partners make good use of an experimental approach to development initiatives. Before they adopt a particular strategy, they undertake pilot projects to test both its overall utility and the specific methods that they will use to pursue it. Their documents on such exercises demonstrate (again) an admirable ability to extract insights from their experiences into (a) key elements of development initiatives and (b) their own mistakes in the pilot projects. This latter point is extremely important. Pilot studies can only succeed if they are pursued with a willingness for self-criticism. This is strongly evident in these documents, and it is clearly an important – and very encouraging – part of PRIA's culture.

7 PRIA's Style: Moderate Postures in the Service of Fundamental Change

The division of labour, noted above, between PRIA and ISS deserves further comment. PRIA's approach is to adopt a moderate stance, restraining itself from the more sharply critical (and quite productive) posture of ISS. This restraint gives it opportunities to influence governments through congenial discussions which ISS would find impossible, given its critical stance. So for example, PRIA was able to serve as the main enabling body for the sub-committee of the recent Constitutional Review Commission – a role which ISS could not play because some in government resented its more adversarial approach. India and its PRIs badly need both PRIA and ISS. Their differing roles (which have the same constructive purpose) are well chosen.

In other words, despite its moderate postures, PRIA has an admirably bold (indeed, sensibly radical) set of aims. It seeks to strengthen PRIs and to build the capacity of civil society organisations to lend desperately needed support to PRIs. As a valuable by-product, which PRIA fully understands, these efforts also develop the capacity of and links between civil society organisations. It thus has a potent impact in encouraging “political and civil pluralism”, which is an important aim of Sida's global strategy on governance. On both of these fronts – PRIs and civil society – PRIA's moderate style should not be interpreted as timidity. It is a carefully calculated strategy to pursue fundamental change in the policy process and in society.

That is especially apparent from PRIA's strong preoccupation with impoverished, low status and socially excluded groups. PRIA understands the single greatest danger in the devolution of power and funds to PRIs: those bodies might be captured by prosperous groups that have strong prejudices against the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and women. PRIs might thus intensify pre-existing inequalities and impede the pursuit of poverty reduction and social justice. PRIA's focus on these groups is intended to prevent that, and to prevent the discrediting of democratic decentralisation – which has great promise on many other fronts. *PRIA and its partners are a decidedly progressive force.*

Despite its limitations, which it well understands, PRIA has achieved one other thing that is quite remarkable. With PRIA in mind, this writer recently asked specialists on Africa, the Middle East and Latin America how many countries in those regions had one or more large NGOs which (like PRIA) succeed in building strong networks extending from the national level down to voluntary associations among poor people at the grassroots. The answers were: *none* in Africa (not even in the new South Africa), *none* in the Middle East, and *only one* in Latin America (Brazil). In other words, PRIA's success on this front is extraordinary in global terms. It is not ‘just another’ Third World NGO.

PART II: REPORT OF THE JOINT REVIEW TEAM

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

PRIA is a national-level NGO working on issues related to participatory training, governance, environmentally sustainable development and civil society. SIDA has supported PRIA since 1995, in the implementation of a nation-wide programme for strengthening *panchayati raj* institutions (PRIs). The geographical coverage has grown from 7 states at inception to 18 states in the phase that concludes in June 2002. Apart from SIDA, others who have supported the programme include the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) of the Govt. of India, the Swiss Agency for Development Co-operation, the Ford Foundation and Cordaid.

PRIA's involvement in support to PRIs: PRIA pioneered pro-active NGO support to institutions of local self-governance after the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts. In collaboration with its partners – the Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organisations (NCRSO) – work commenced in 1995. The first two phases ran from 1995 to 1997 and from 1997 to 1999. The third phase followed and concludes in June 2002.

1.2 Independent Joint Review

SIDA has commissioned an independent review of the project as per the agreement it has with PRIA. This is the report on the basis of the review. It is in the nature of an ex-post assessment of the project's relevance, performance and success to date.

1.3 Issues to be addressed

The two-member joint review team (JRT) assigned the task have been asked to address the following issues, henceforth referred to as Terms of Reference (ToR):

1. The continued relevance of the project (approach, objectives, modalities of implementation etc.) with regard to the prevailing context;
2. The project outputs with regard to the expected end-results;
3. The effectiveness of the approach/strategy being used to produce these results;
4. The efficiency of project management, including the quality, quantity and timeliness of delivery of inputs;
5. The extent to which mid-course corrections were taken up based on the internal mid-term review undertaken by PRIA;
6. Early signs of potential impact and sustainability of results, including the contribution to capacity development;

The joint review team has been asked to identify problems and constraints, if any, and propose follow-up actions for making project outcomes sustainable.

1.4 The Joint Review Team

The JRT comprising of Mr. R. Parasuram and Dr. Anand Inbanathan undertook the task during the period April 25–June 3, 2002.

1.5 The Report

The report, presented herein, is organised by and large as stipulated by SIDA in their document titled **‘Terms of Reference’** dated April 8, 2002.

2 The Joint Review: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

In view of other commitments, the members requested SIDA to adopt a flexible approach towards fulfilling the various requirements of the review. While accepting this, SIDA was also of the view that the two members should devote time in such a manner as to be able to interact with the External Consultant, Professor James Manor, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK, who has been separately assigned the task to write on SIDA's Policy to Support Democratic Decentralisation in India. Accordingly the two members designed their joint review methodology.

2.2 Procedure Followed

States Visited:

The Joint Review Team (JRT) held intensive interaction at SIDA and PRIA, in New Delhi, and made extensive field visits to the states of Madhya Pradesh (by both members together), Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh (by Mr. R. Parasuram), and to Kerala and Andhra Pradesh (by Dr. Anand Inbanathan). Along with Prof. James Manor, Mr. Owe Andersson and Mr. Ramesh Mukalla of the Embassy of Sweden were also part of the team that visited Madhya Pradesh.

Basis of Selection:

Selection of states for visit by the JRT was made in consultation with PRIA. Three states where major initiatives by Regional Research Organisations (RSOs) have been witnessed in the north i.e. Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan were selected. Another state, Himachal Pradesh was selected as PRIA works there directly with partner Voluntary Development Organisations (VDOs) for programme implementation unlike in the other three. In a similar manner two states in the south, Kerala, where PRIA works through an RSO and Andhra Pradesh, where it works directly, were selected.

Persons met and meetings:

The JRT, given the time-schedule and convenience of PRIA and its RSO, decided to rely on intensive discussions with PRIA at New Delhi and the RSOs in their respective locations across the country as the first part of their exercise. Field visits were also planned in consultation with PRIA and RSOs. During these visits the emphasis was placed on meetings with partner VDOs, field level workers of the RSOs and the VDOs, government officials, elected public representatives at various levels of the three-tier PRIs, and in meeting ordinary citizens in the village-setting, in groups and individually (**Annexure I**).

PRIA and the RSOs provided the JRT with copies of documents, reports, material pertaining to training and advocacy, campaign literature etc.

Tour itineraries were prepared with a view to allow for sufficient time for meetings and interaction at various levels including especially in the villages covered under the programme, the *Panchayat* Resource Centres (PRCs), the *Panchayat* Information Centres (PICs), *Gram Panchayat* offices, *Panchayat Samitis* and Block Offices, *Zilla Panchayat* and District Offices.

2.3 Objectives for the field study

The JRT visited the various states and participated in wide ranging discussions at all levels with a view to:

- appreciate the socio-political milieu in which democratic decentralisation is being ushered in;
- gauge, to the extent possible, the commitment of the state governments towards furthering the cause of decentralisation;
- gauge the willingness and commitment of administrations at the state and district levels to facilitate in the transfer of powers and responsibilities to the PRIs – in the implementation of development programmes and for making them the third-tier of democratic governance;
- assess the role played by PRIA in programme implementation and project management, especially in respect of its relationship with RSOs and their requirements in the field situation; and in a similar manner the role of the RSOs themselves vis-a-vis their partners;
- evaluate the outreach and impact of various programme components as evidenced by the interaction with local representatives and citizens;
- identify problems and constraints, if any at the policy level and during implementation; and thereby try and be informed to

The JRT members held in-depth discussions amongst themselves and made a preliminary presentation before the officers of SIDA and PRIA at New Delhi on May 31, 2002. The visit to Madhya Pradesh was made by the JRT members during April 26–30 2002. Mr. R. Parasuram visited Uttar Pradesh (May 19–21, 2002), Rajasthan (May 23–28, 2002) and Himachal Pradesh (June 1–2, 2002). Dr. Anand Inbanathan visited Kerala (May 15–19, 2002) and Andhra Pradesh (May 21–24, 2002). Internal discussions between JRT members were held during April 25–26, and May 30–31, 2002.

3 The Environment for Decentralisation

3.1 The National Scene

As is well known and extensively documented, the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution have set the agenda for administrative decentralisation in the country. Following this, the states either amended their respective *Panchayati Raj* Acts or had fresh Act passed by their legislatures. The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) in the Government of India played a catalytic role in encouraging the states to transfer powers and responsibilities in programme implementation to the three-tier Panchayat bodies. Political compulsions of the day notwithstanding, it has not only used persuasive skills at its command but also (if necessary) resorted to gentle coercion to bring recalcitrant states in line. This has been possible through the Ministry's control over financial resources that it annually transfers to the states (most of it directly to DRDAs at the district level) for rural infrastructure development and poverty alleviation programmes. While this augurs well for the evolution of PRIs as effective bodies for programme implementation, there are limits to which the Ministry can push the agenda, especially with regard to making the PRIs effective instruments of governance, as the details are by and large left to the individual states to work out through their respective Acts and rules.

The urban situation is more difficult and confusing. The catalytic and synergising role played by the MoRD is not found to have been replicated in a similar manner for the urban local bodies (ULBs). Similarly, even in the rural context whereas the 73rd amendment clearly lists the subjects that should be dealt with at the *panchayat* level it cannot be said that other Ministries of the Union Government concerned with many of these subjects have displayed commitment at a similar to that of the MoRD.

3.2 The States

There are variations in decentralisation between the states of the country. This is not a totally unexpected development. While for several decades the Constitution did not explicitly stop the concentration of power and authority at the state government level, devolution of some of these to the PRIs and ULBs was made mandatory only in 1993. By then politics had been fashioned in a manner that only helped a non-participatory style of governance to emerge at the district and village levels. In the absence of constitutional guarantees and safeguards, powers such as those devolved did not amount to much even on a conservative scale. In fact even in a state such as Karnataka where significant strides had been made in that direction, the sustainability of the decentralised governance were always under a cloud of uncertainty – for the most part a product of political exigencies and opportunism.

3.3 Social Factors

In addition to the above each state, (and in large states, each region) presents a distinct social milieu that influences the prevailing equations of power and politics. Some of the features are common to the entire country like exclusion in the name of gender, or caste or limits being imposed on the access to resources and equitable sharing of benefits. But the degree to which such issues play a role at the local levels could vary not only across the country but within regions. Then again some issues might have distinctly local flavour. For example issues like women's empowerment could put Kerala and western Rajasthan at two ends of a continuum, and yet within northern India, Himachal Pradesh is better placed when compared to not only Rajasthan but even Punjab and Haryana, in spite of higher economic levels of the latter two.

3.4 Relevance and necessity for a project to further the objectives of democratic decentralisation and participatory governance:

Given the prevalent situation in so far as making the PRIs not only implementing agencies for various development programmes but also as a third and effective tier of governance, the following need to be taken into account:

Environmental Factors

- A. A concrete and stable framework exists within the country for deepening the process of decentralisation of governance¹.
- B. The entire process of devolution of powers is in an evolutionary stage and varies in its depth and spread from state to state.
- C. The political will and commitment shown by state governments to quicken the pace of bestowing powers and responsibilities to PRIs is prone to periodic fluctuations and resulting uncertainties.
- D. The social factors which inhibit the process of change and often obstruct the developing of an effective system of grassroots democracy vary from state to state and within a state from region to region.

Administrative Factors

- E. The task of managing the change that leads to democratic decentralisation and empowerment at the grassroots levels is immense in the prevailing socio-political context. The state on its own cannot handle it. However, what is important is that civil society organisations (CSOs) have been able to create for themselves and be accepted to play a vital role in this respect.
- F. Governmental efforts, including enactments, promulgation of rules, organising of training programmes and by dissemination of information have unleashed energies at the grassroots level that throw up a demand for a speedier and more coherent strategy for decentralisation and empowerment. CSOs can play an important role in channelising these energies for sustainable outcomes.
- G. From within the government, departmental efforts could be fragmented, as is evidenced by the catalytic role played on the one hand by the *Panchayati Raj* Departments to promote PRIs, and on the other hand by administrative departments to build their grassroots strategy around organisations promoted for the purpose (single-sector user committees – that is, parallel bodies).

A project that furthers the cause of democratic decentralisation and empowerment at the grassroots is not only relevant, but socio-political and institutional factors have created such a space for CSOs to work in. An analysis of PRIA's approach to occupy such a space as defined in its strategic plan and Project Document would help assess the continued relevance of the programmes implemented and their impact in the field².

¹ That this framework might in itself be in the need for restructuring is part of a larger debate and therefore not considered here.

² Of the TOR given to JRT the first and the sixth signify these issues. The others, managerial in orientation, link-up these two.

4 The Project: Design, Outcomes and Recommendations

4.1 Background

The present phase of the project was taken up for implementation in the year 2000 for a two-year period. It envisaged expansion of coverage from twelve states to eighteen states in the country. In the meanwhile PRIA underwent an internal strategic review³ in 1999. Though the exercise was carried out internally, two eminent facilitators from outside were requested to help in the task. The strategic review mandated a continued long-term commitment towards strengthening local self governance (LSG). A programmatic review in 1999 helped identify the next steps in elaborating the strategy. Based on these and after consultation between PRIA and its partner RSOs the proposal was revised and submitted to SIDA and other donors. The proposal was appraised by a two-member Joint Appraisal Mission⁴. An internal mid-term review was also conducted for PRIA by a two-member team⁵.

Programme Priorities:

Programme Priorities as determined by PRIA, based on the experience of the past two phases and informed by the strategic choices made (as described in its strategic plan and the feed back received from the field) it was decided that the future phases of the project should entail scaling up of the coverage within the states where it was being implemented and extend it to some new states as well. It was also decided that new areas where coverage should be extended should include Schedule 5 areas (predominantly tribal districts of otherwise largely non-tribal states) and Schedule 6 areas of the states of north-east India.

It was also appreciated that stronger linkages across the three-tier PRIs were needed. While maintaining its focus on strengthening *Gram Sabha* and *Gram Panchayat* the project should pay attention to the other two tiers as well. An important dimension included in the project was to extend it to cover selected urban local bodies (ULB)⁶.

Redefining Programme Strategies:

For the phase commencing June 2000 it was recognized that it would be essential to work according to a long-term plan. A ten-year thrust to cover two rounds of five-year tenures of PRIs was envisaged. Within this ten-year framework a project for the next five years was prepared. (The phase that ended in June 2002 is part of this project).

The Project document called for strengthening and deepening collaboration with RSOs and for new partnerships to extend coverage and import. In addition closer collaboration with government agencies at all levels and a more systematic documentation of the lessons learned were put down as part of the overall strategy.

4.2 PRIA's Perspective

An overview of PRIA's overall perspective shall help inform the extent to which the programme interventions determined for the phase (June 2000–June 2002) help further the three primary strategies that

³ PRIA 1999: Enter the New Millennium – Strategic Plan of PRIA (April 1999)

⁴ Embassy of Sweden, 2000: Report of the Joint Appraisal Mission (March–April 2000)

⁵ PRIA, 2001: Programmeme for strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in India, Mid Term Review (Draft Report) (Sept–Oct. 2001).

⁶ PRIA, 2000: Programmeme Proposal For Improving the Functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India (January 2000)

comprise its work in the domain of local self-governance namely: Capacity Building, Policy Advocacy and Knowledge Building.

The objectives as cited in the project proposal include the following:

- (1) Build PRIs (a term, however unconventionally and yet significantly, used for both rural and urban local bodies) as institutions of self-governance, and not as mere implementers of development programmes; use micro planning as a tool to further this.
- (2) Increase participation in decision-making by women and other weaker sections to help enhance their role, status and leadership in self-governance.
- (3) Focus on building, promoting and empowering new leadership of women, SCs and STs.
- (4) Help PRIs assert their access to and control over local natural and human resources; and
- (5) Strengthen PRIs to impart clarity to their roles, systems of governance, accountability and transparency.

4.3 Programme Interventions

Four broad categories of programme interventions were designed. It was also recognised that the nature and mix of these programme interventions need to be determined in the context of the situation prevalent in a particular state. These broad interventions and their components were determined to be as follows:

Promoting Public Ownership

1. Information Dissemination Strategies
2. Public Education
3. Linking Civil Society
4. Accountability

Local Development

1. Micro Planning
2. Resource Use
3. Matching Funds
4. Managing Services

Building Capacity

1. *Gram Sabha*
2. Elected Representatives
3. New Leadership
4. Structural Functioning
5. Negotiating with administration
6. Networking

Research & Advocacy

1. Monitoring
2. On-line Feedback
3. Policy Implementation
4. Policy Reform
5. Creating enabling environment
6. Knowledge building.

Based on a logical framework approach these broad interventions and their components (listed above), called intervention strategies, were expanded into activities against which expected outcomes and the indicators that will help assess programme success were determined.

4.4 Programme Design

The Project has been designed around four core programmes. In addition it has a small programme for commencing intervention in the urban sector. This may be considered as an extension of the PRJA Programme, but for the sake of clarity is dealt with separately in this report. A sixth component deals

with the establishment of *Panchayat* Resource Centres (PRCs) and *Panchayat* Information Centres (PICs). This component is more in the nature of providing institutional base and support for the core programmes.

The four core programmes in the Project are:

1. Pre-Election Voter Awareness Campaign (PEVAC)
2. *Panchayati Raj Jagrukta Abhiyan* (PRJA)
3. Strengthening *gram sabhas*
4. Micro-Planning in *Gram Panchayats*

It is proposed to critically examine the implementation of these programmes and see to what extent the project outputs help realise expected end-results, and whether the Project design through these core programmes and the institutional underpinnings imparted through the setting up of PRCs covered all aspects of the broad interventions listed in para 4.3 above.

Democratic decentralisation as a process is beset with uncertainties and ambiguities. While some of the actors like the Central and State governments, elected representatives at the national and state levels, functionaries of political parties and government officials have had the advantage of being around for a while, the new actors in the form of elected PRI representatives numbering several hundred thousands and their electors numbering several hundred million have had the first significant, country-wide responsibility for governance and programme management thrust upon them after the enactment of the 73rd and 74th amendments. The priority therefore should be to ensure that they are educated about the tasks and responsibilities assigned to them so that they are able to function in such a manner as to be able to give themselves a better way of life than before. This, in essence is what the core programmes need to achieve.

4.5 Pre-Election Voter Awareness Campaign (PEVAC)

Outcomes:

- (1) Pre-Election Voter Awareness Campaigns (PEVAC) were organised in several states to synchronize with the second round of elections to the PRIs. Generally, the mode of carrying out such a campaign, as the name suggests, is through conveying a message of *panchayats* through various means, to the largest number possible. Obviously, the means employed are the type which can communicate a succinct message in the most effective manner – and methods used were jeep rallies, folk arts, *padayatras*, public meetings, and through pamphlets and other literature. ‘Meet the candidate’ programmes too had been organised, where the local people could ask candidates questions about how they expected to carry out their functions as elected representatives.
- (2) Eliciting support from official and quasi-judicial agencies like central and state government departments, local administrations and State Election Commissions can be counted as having contributed to the success of the campaign. It contributed to the campaign’s legitimacy and non-partisan characteristics.

Coverage:

Strategies of both extensive and intensive coverage were adopted. In the former the involvement of the State Election Commission and, at its behest, of the local administration helped in the dissemination of election related information. Intensive coverage in villages directly implemented by the RSOs and their partner VDOs, would also have had a positive impact.

Findings:

- (1) PEVAC as a campaign-oriented strategy for creating awareness among voters and electors about the PRIs appears to have had some impact. In the case of those elected for the first time and in helping the electorate select the right candidate, PEVAC has encouraged people to have a clearer orientation towards the choices available to them. PEVAC provides for early dissemination of information about the structure and process of the *panchayats* to both electors and candidates. Interaction between the two has also provided an indication to the people about what they can expect from the candidates once they are elected. However, there was no clear indication (and this is not likely to be conclusively decided one way or the other) of how much of the actual participation of the people in the subsequent elections could be attributed to the PEVAC. Such things are nearly impossible to measure.
- (2) Notwithstanding the relative success of the PEVAC in increasing the awareness levels of the people, it is not always possible for the people to choose whom they want as their representatives, since other factors than the electors' preferences come into play. For example, the influence of local elites is still perceptible in the choice of candidates in several places. Further, political parties were involved in choosing candidates.
- (3) One of the outcomes claimed of the PEVAC campaign was that it reduced the number of 'dummy' candidates or puppets of local elites. However, the scale of the reduction is difficult to estimate. As of now, it is unlikely that on the basis of only one PEVAC campaign that the number of dummy candidates has been drastically reduced.
- (4) The first round of PEVAC during 2000–02 has helped generate a rich collection of campaign-related literature. Documentation of experiences in the field has generated valuable insights for building future campaign strategies.
- (5) Programmes such as PEVAC are not only episodic, and occur once in five years in each state (assuming elections are held on time), but at different times in different states. However, there is a definite need for their continuance, keeping in view the very large field, as well as the frequent changes that occur in the polity. A change in 'regime' at the state level may require changes in the programme of PEVAC itself.

Recommendations:

- (1) PEVAC as a core programme appears to have been soundly conceived and needs to be supported.
- (2) As it is implemented with a campaign mode and occurs whenever elections are held, in months preceding an election, the next round of PEVAC should be planned in detail to include voter education spread over longer periods of time, especially at *Gram Sabha* meetings.
- (3) Efforts could be made, as part of the research component of the Project, to help the *Gram Sabha* evaluate performance of office bearers both in programme implementation and promoting the social agenda for the village. This will also contribute towards promoting transparency and accountability.
- (4) As sufficient time is available before the next round of elections, greater involvement by civil society organisations should be considered. This can be done in partnership with the State Election Commission.
- (5) A PEVAC for the other two tiers of PRIs (*Zilla Panchayats* and *Block Panchayats*) should also be designed. This will not only increase awareness amongst the voters but also help make the present and future incumbents appreciate the need for transparency and accountability. This point should be sufficiently emphasised, since the sense of accountability is hardly visible among the members of the *panchayats*. Also, the same voters/electors select the representatives for all the three tiers. Hence, their sense of belonging in the *panchayat* system will be furthered if their interaction with candidates of all the three tiers (and not just *Gram Panchayats*) is encouraged and facilitated.

- (6) The PRCs (and the PICs wherever they exist) should be able to guide voters well in advance about their rights and incumbents' responsibility and accountability through details on attendance, participation and involvement.

4.6 Panchayat Raj Jagrukta Abhiyan (PRJA)

PRJA i.e. *Panchayat Raj* Awareness Campaign is the second core programme that has been implemented under the Project. The magnitude and dimensions of the tasks envisaged under it undoubtedly daunting. Without going into the details of the numbers covered through training, as this is in any case well documented both by the state agencies and others, in this section the JRT shall restrict themselves to commenting on the programme strategy, coverage, findings, and recommendations for the future.

Capacity building, policy advocacy and knowledge building are PRIA's three primary strategies here. While expanding these into broad interventions, the Project proposal envisaged work in four broad areas (para 4.3). Of the three core programmes designed for the purpose (para 4.4), PEVAC is a time-bound campaign strategy for awareness generation, but the other two (strengthening *gram sabhas* and Micro-Planning in *Gram Panchayats*) are long-term, institution-based awareness generation and capacity building programmes. The PRJA programme can actually straddle all the programme interventions (para 4.3).

Panchayati Raj Departments, State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs), and other training institutions have been entrusted with the official responsibility for training elected representatives. They have been open to help and cooperation of other agencies like UNICEF. After an initial phase of reluctance and ambivalence towards accepting assistance from non-governmental agencies, most state governments now find such help acceptable. A number of voluntary organisations have tried to bridge the gap between the requirements of training and capacity building and the ability of state institutions to meet them.

Approximately three million PRI representatives get elected for a five-year period around the country. Building the capacity of not only these elected representatives to manage PRIs, but also of the ordinary citizens in *Gram Sabhas* (who have an important role to play in ensuring transparency, fair-play and accountability) is undoubtedly the most crucial input into strengthening participatory democracy. The PRJA campaign tries to bring together the inputs that can contribute towards capacity building in both sectors, with the preponderance of effort focused at *Gram Panchayat* level.

Overwhelmed by the sheer numbers involved in a capacity building exercise, state initiatives can fall into the mechanics of fulfilling targets and production of training material. They have also been seen to suffer from the inadequacies that creep in with the adoption of a top-down approach. Instead of waiting for preparation of detailed training manuals that can end up concentrating only on rules and procedures, the PRJA campaign has tried to capture the dynamics of prevailing power equations and social realities at the village level. Perceptively selected differences in choosing programme components were seen in the states visited.

Coverage:

Both extensive and intensive interventions have been designed. The former is in collaboration with state institutions, especially the *Panchayati Raj* Departments and the SIRDs. Intensive coverage on the other hand directly organises awareness campaigns and training by PRIA or the RSOs and their partners in the villages.

Findings:

- (1) PRJA has been designed as an awareness generation and capacity building programme under the Project. As such it entails a more sustained presence in any one area, while the programme is being implemented.
- (2) PRIA and its partners have successfully placed the programme in the space provided by the state institutions for capacity building.
- (3) The programme components, although addressing similar overall objectives, vary sensibly in details from state to state. For example in a state like Himachal Pradesh where caste-equations are not as accentuated as elsewhere, problems that arise out of a difficult hilly terrain which are predominantly infrastructure related, are stressed. But in Rajasthan, issues related to *dalit* empowerment are made central to the training strategy. Issues related to women's empowerment and that of *dalits* have been emphasised in all the states covered in this review.
- (4) Working with state institutions for facilitating capacity building on an extensive scale and working intensively in blocks and villages covered directly has helped in two ways. The former has bestowed a degree of legitimacy to the entire exercise. SIRDs have appreciated the inputs developed in the PRJA programme for deployment elsewhere. Secondly, direct involvement by the RSOs and their partners has helped throw up local issues, which can inform awareness generation and training strategy.
- (5) The quality of training material produced is by and large of a very good standard. This was validated by villagers and elected representatives in their interaction with the JRT.
- (6) The programme in its present format needs a careful analysis of the extent to which its coverage can be expanded and/or intensified. For example, it is worthwhile examining whether training should be predominantly focused on women and *dalits* and others from deprived groups, or whether all representatives should be covered with the same (or some) level of intensity.
- (7) Similarly the question regarding working with other groups at the village level also needs to be looked into. A large number of parallel bodies have been set up under different programmes. Some are single sector user's committees like the watershed development committees, village forest committees, etc. Others are generically different, for example, parallel bodies set up in Andhra Pradesh (*Janmabhoomi*), Haryana (*Gram Vikas Samity*), Kerala (expert committee to serve as an advisory body providing technical expertise to the Panchayats) and Himachal Pradesh (Vigilance Committee).

Recommendations:

- (1) The PRJA is the core programme of the Project for enhancing awareness and building capacity at local levels. This is less of a campaign and more of an on-going programme. It should be continued into the next phase.
- (2) PRJA should retain and in fact strengthen its local fervour to be able to build into the training programmes social issues that are relevant.
- (3) Focusing on women elected representatives is important – the more so because, following affirmative action, at least one-third of all the elected members are women, and a large number of them are likely to be first timers. The focus on *dalits* too is essential, inasmuch as their position in society is still precarious, due to their traditional position, and the poverty that a substantial proportion still find themselves in.
- (4) The extensive-intensive mix should be continued. Collaborative arrangements with SIRDs and other similar institutions should be further strengthened.
- (5) A clear-cut policy regarding associating with parallel bodies at the local level needs to be developed. If their existence is a reality it should be accepted and collaborative arrangements worked out accordingly, at least with those that are open to participation from below.

4.7 Strengthening Gram Sabhas

The third core programme aims at strengthening the *Gram Sabha* – the body made up of all adults in a locality which is to meet to deliberate on PRI matters. Perhaps the most significant provision in the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act that captures the essence of participatory democracy and decentralisation of authority lies in recognizing a statutory role for the *Gram Sabha*. It provides a ‘political forum’ to people in every locality to meet and discuss local development problems, and consequently, understand the needs and aspirations of the community. It is also a forum to analyse the development and administrative actions of elected representatives and thereby, ensure transparency and accountability in the *Panchayati Raj* system.⁷ The eminent social scientist Rajni Kothari sees them as a bulwark against the exploitative predilections of dominant castes or individuals.⁸

What actually happens in the *Gram Sabhas* is nuanced by distinctive features of the local socio-political environment. But certain general trends are evident. For example, Sarpanches (chairpersons) are reluctant to convene meetings. People are indifferent about attendance. Infrastructure-related issues predominate over social issues at meetings. Upper castes usually dominate. Sarpanches try either to avoid taking *Gram Sabha* into confidence or, at times, to browbeat it.

Coverage:

The RSOs and their partners have tried to cover the *Gram Panchayats* (and their *Gram Sabhas*) in one block in every district that they work in. RSOs have built on their relationships with the *Panchayati Raj* Departments and SIRDs to enable the distribution of training material.

Findings:

- (1) The popular disinclination to attend *Gram Sabhas* has been well documented. Many did not have the required quorum. Further, the persons who attended the *Sabhas* were those who sought an individual benefit. Once this purpose was served, they did not attend subsequent *Sabhas*. This observation was made to us several times, and by different persons. Women from self-help groups were more regular in attending *Gram Sabhas*, thanks to the encouragement of the sponsors of the SHGs. Their participation at meetings was also enhanced as a result of their experience in these groups.
- (2) *Gram Panchayat* leaders were also disinclined to convene *Gram Sabhas* because they had met the expectations of the people and hence expected hostility at meetings. Explicit comments to this effect were made in parts of Kerala. Promises made to the people could not be met due to the financial problems of the state government, which delayed payments for existing projects.
- (3) While these *Sabhas* have been projected as assemblies where *panchayats* would initiate the planning process, the levels of attendance and participation have been so low that they are seen to have failed as arenas for public participation and direct democracy. Under these circumstances, PRIA's programme to educate and encourage people to participate in the *Gram Sabhas* is both necessary and commendable.
- (4) *Panchayats* are intended to provide accountability to the people. This has two aspects – information dissemination to the people, and the answerability of the elected representatives to the people. In both these functions the *Gram Sabha* is a crucial (though not the only) institution. While in some states (Kerala is an example) specific measures have been incorporated to inform the people about the activities of the *panchayats*, the second function has been more or less ignored in practice (the establishment of an ombudsman in Kerala has important implications for accountability, but its slow processes minimise its effect). The question of ensuring any penal action has been down-played in

⁷ PRIA (2001): The State of Panchayats, A Participatory Perspective, Manoj Rai & others, editors, p.77, *Gram Sabha: The People's Council*.

⁸ Kothari, Rajni (1988): *State Against Democracy in Search of Human Governance*, Ajanta, Delhi.

virtually any PRI programme – hence the weakness of accountability measures in the *panchayats* for the control of corruption.

- (5) A peculiarity of the *panchayat* system is that ‘accountability’ is more related to the functioning of the *Gram Panchayats* than the block or district *panchayats*. Rarely do members of these latter two bodies attend *Gram Sabhas*, and rarely is information about the functioning of these *panchayats* given to the people. Also, rarely do *panchayat* members (block and district) interact with the people of their constituencies (other than if a few people go to the *panchayat* offices specifically to meet the representative). Thus, while encouraging people to attend *Gram Sabhas* is necessary and important, making representatives of the block and district *panchayats* accountable is also necessary.
- (6) Although transparency of the *panchayats* has been an important aspect of decentralisation, which facilitates accountability, this aspect has been more or less subsumed under the functioning of *Gram Sabhas*. This is not entirely desirable, for several reasons. *Gram Sabhas* do not function to the extent that they need to, in terms of participation of individuals (an aspect which generally gets missed out is that village elites, and other influential, upper class persons do not usually attend gram sabhas – though they probably have some influence on the functioning of the panchayats).
 - ii) there is usually a reluctance from officials to part with information, even (as in Kerala) there is the mandatory requirement to part with some documents when requested by the people (they are entitled to get photocopies, but these are costly, and hence they don’t usually ask for copies).
 - iii) there is no clear feeling among village people that attending gram sabhas is a means of planning development projects that are beneficial to their villages. Attending gram sabhas for individual benefits has been the common feature in most gram sabhas. In some states, a Right to Information Act has been enacted. However, even here, the information dissemination to the people leaves much to be desired. There is a distinct disinclination of officials to part with information, and whether to hide their wrong-doings or to project a higher level of power than local people, the outcome is that people are poorly informed about the programmes that are available, and the benefits that they can derive from the panchayats.
- (8) In the course of the PRIA campaigns to encourage people to attend *Gram Sabhas*, their awareness was considerably enhanced. However, there is no immediate indication of the effectiveness of the campaign in terms of actual attendance and participation in the *Gram Sabhas*. Follow-up and monitoring of these campaigns is thus a necessity, over a period of time.
- (9) We must recognise that capacity building of representatives through the PRJA programme can only do so much. Their responsiveness and accountability will only improve if members of *Gram Sabha* are enthused into participation.
- (10) As thousands of *Gram Sabhas* must be covered in each state, the task is stupendous. PRIA and the RSOs and their local partners have been found to have successfully created space for themselves in this endeavor alongside state agencies. This can be seen as part of a larger civil society movement that can be built in the next phase.
- (11) Working with ordinary members at *Gram Sabha* meetings addresses vital ingredients of the overall strategy – addressing issues that relate to the empowerment of women, *dalits* and other weaker sections; and building the capacity of the local people by interventions that ensure improvements in the delivery of education and health services.
- (12) Several parallel bodies (user committees) have been constituted at the village level in some states, under programmes funded either by state governments or by external agencies. Some of these bodies have been provided with linkages (however, tenuous) with *Gram Panchayats* and *Gram Sabhas*. A distinction needs to be made between those bodies that provide for interventions in a well defined subject matter area as for example, natural resources management, or collection of user charges and asset maintenance (watershed management, joint forest management, water users’

associations etc.) and others that are established with the intention of circumventing the role of *Panchayats* (*Janmabhoomi* (in Andhra Pradesh), and *Gram Vikas Samitis* of Haryana).

Recommendations:

- (1) Working directly with village populations should continue as a core programme. It provides an opportunity to understand the ground realities and helps continuously inform the overall programme intervention strategy. However, there is a distinction that needs to be maintained. For most people (villagers as well as officials) the words '*Gram Sabha*' refer only to the meetings which are periodically convened, to address people's issues. We need to seek to enable the village population as a whole to make its influence felt at all times, and not just at *Sabha* meetings. The focus of the programme should be to interact with the people regularly and frequently. One factor inhibiting the participation of people is the tendency to keep participation related to specific times, such as meetings, statutorily ordained.
- (2) Even though the bureaucracy might continue to show reluctance to share information, a continuous drive to encourage people's participation is well warranted.
- (3) A conscious decision needs to be taken in regard to working with the parallel bodies at the village-level, where such bodies may be open to cooperation with PRIs. A strategy needs to be consciously calibrated: to work towards stronger linkages between the parallel bodies in the field of NRM and the *Gram Panchayats*. The overall objective should be to make these bodies accountable to the *Gram Sabhas*. At the same time, efforts can continue to bring all work within the domain of the *Gram Panchayat* and *Gram Sabha*.
- (4) There is considerable scope for improvement in the functioning of the *Gram Sabhas*. However, it is less than desirable to suggest that they can automatically be considered as venues of 'social audits' (which entail a far more elaborate procedure than the *Sabhas*' meetings of short duration). Thus, there is the greater need for the campaign on gram sabhas to not only encourage the people to attend them, but also educate them about what gram sabhas are, and what they are not.

4.8 Micro-Planning in Panchayats

The 73rd constitution Amendment Act empowers the PRIs to prepare plans for economic development and social justice, and implement them. States have acted through including provisions in their respective Acts to empower the PRIs and the District Planning Committee (DPC) to plan for their respective jurisdictions. Given the socio-political situation it is perhaps too much to expect that the top-down approach would be turned on its head and bring in an approach that conceptualises, aggregates and builds a plan from the bottom. The poor track record in this respect, with the possible exception of Kerala, has been due to not only lack of political will to loosen the control exercised from state capitals, but also to an absence of role-clarity vis-à-vis the three tiers of PRIs, the *Gram Sabha* and the DPC. Secondly, states have not tried to transfer large unearmarked funds to the PRIs for them to plan according to their priorities. The PRIs themselves have also varied in their efforts and success in raising resources wherever so authorised. Even in Kerala (which has often been projected as a success story so far as the devolution of powers is concerned) the lack of adequate financial resources have been stated as a reason for not funding some of the plans prepared by the *Panchayats*.

While the *Gram Sabha* offers the institutional framework for working with elected representatives, social groups and ordinary citizens, a micro-planning exercise provides the necessary process orientation. The relevant constitutional provision specifically calls for the preparation of plans not only for economic development but also for promoting social justice. This offers a unique opportunity for civil society organisations to work on a social agenda even if financial resources are a constraint.

PRIA and the RSOs have tried to work on micro-plans at selected locations. This has been tried out on a pilot scale and the results have been documented. However, much more ground remains to be covered, which will be possible only if the state agencies involve themselves more actively.

Findings:

- (1) Micro-planning exercises, though fraught with the risk of raising unrealistic expectations, further the objective of information dissemination and bringing the village society together to apply their collective mind on local economic and social issues.
- (2) It imparts the necessary process orientation to the task of building capacity of both representatives and ordinary citizens.

Recommendations:

- (1) Micro-planning exercises at the *Gram Panchayat* and *Gram Sabha* level should be encouraged and the scope and details of the programme expanded and their content deepened.
- (2) Planning for sustainable use of the natural resources of the villages should be part of the exercise; ending asymmetric access to such resources. The equitable sharing of benefits should inform the exercise.
- (3) Social issues including involvement of women and economically weaker and socially deprived sections should drive the plan agenda.
- (4) To win wider support for the micro-planning programme, RSOs and partners should work with state agencies for the publication of easy to understand guidelines and instruction booklets.
- (5) Inputs from parallel bodies should be taken into consideration. Office-bearers of these bodies should be invited to actively participate in the planning process.
- (6) The PRC staff should be further exposed to tools of planning at the micro-level.

4.9 Urban Governance

Small interventions in selected urban local bodies (ULB) have been initiated by PRIA and the RSOs. This helps leverage the experience gained in building capacities at the local levels in the village situation to work in urban areas. Most of the small towns are not much different from large and over-grown villages when measured against indicators of socio-economic development. Measured against an infrastructure development index, they might actually be found lacking when compared to smaller habitations. Thus commencement of work in small selected ULBs appears to be logical. However with limited work done it might be too early at this stage to offer a detailed comment. Also the paucity of time did not allow the JRT to go into finer details.

Recommendations:

- (1) Including selected ULBs in the programmes like PEVAC, PRJA and the micro-planning exercise would help put the experience gained and expertise acquired in the rural situation to good use, especially if the selected ULB is located within the area of the development block where the PRC is located.
- (2) Adding a few ULBs to the programme would help integrate the rural and urban concerns and priorities at the district level (for the DPC).
- (3) However, expansion into a larger number of ULBs should first be carefully thought out before allowing it to blow into a major programme. While it requires linkages at the institutional level with players who are by and large different from the rural context, availability of funds for the Project should determine its priority. Nonetheless a programme on a pilot scale can be the precursor for an independent programme for the ULBs.

4.10 Panchayat Resource Centres

Panchayat Resource Centres (PRCs) set up by PRIA, RSOs or in some cases by their partner VDOs at the block level provide institutional support for the running of the core programmes. In a similar manner, in some states Panchayat Information Centres (PICs) have been set up at the village level. The RSOs have also set up State Resource Centres (SRCs) at their headquarters. PRIA has established a National Resource Centre at the apex of the pyramid that links these centres. It is called the 'Centre for Local Governance'.

The tasks and responsibilities carried out from the PRCs has been documented in detail by PRIA¹⁰ and therefore are not repeated here. However, some observations from field visits need to be highlighted. While reviewing the core programmes above, the important feature of allowing the RSOs to work out the relative importance of various components of the strategy suitable to local needs has been noted. PRCs play a crucial role in providing resource support for this. At least one male and one female worker, trained for the purpose, work full-time at the PRC. They use the PRC as their office and base to carry out tasks in the field. In Rajasthan the PRC staff was found to have been able to develop excellent rapport with the *Panchayat* office bearers and were seen to be generally well known in the villages. The same was true for Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. In U.P., where PICs have also been set up, there was live contact between the PRC staff and the PIC volunteer who is a local resident of the village. This was likewise seen in Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh.

Findings:

- (1) PRCs are field-based units at the block level. They are used as centres for display of printed and documented literature on *Panchayati Raj* and programme implementation. They are also used as bases to organise the activities connected with PRJA. A cursory look at the attendance registers maintained at the PRCs revealed that *Panchayat* representatives visit the Centres to discuss and be informed of what is happening and what is new. It was seen, for example, in Sitapur that the elected representatives come in to seek clarification on rules and procedures to be followed at *Gram Panchayat* and *Gram Sabha* meetings. Other states too indicated such visits from local people and *panchayat* representatives.
- (2) PRCs were seen, by the elected representatives, to have performed a key role in the PEVAC. Similarly, the continuous institutional support for PRJA and micro-planning programmes was provided from these Centers was appreciated.
- (3) Elected representatives were also appreciative of the information dissemination facility at the PRCs and the responsive climate in which queries were addressed.
- (4) The pro-active stance of the PRC staff in facilitating discussions on social issues relevant to the region, and their willingness to accompany the elected representatives to the block office for transacting business has also been seen as part of a larger commitment.
- (5) PRCs provide the vital institutional underpinnings to the entire programme strategy and interventions. The sustainability aspects of the project are therefore to a large extent dependent on the manner in which PRCs perform. Also, therefore, the question of who can continue to perform a similar role in the post-project phase is vital.
- (6) Outreach of the PRC in some states extends to all the *Gram Panchayats* in a block and in others to either half the number or thereabouts. Strengthening of the PRC set-up at the block level to match the requirements of the proposed interventions needs to be considered.

¹⁰ PRIA: Panchayat Resource Centres as Agents of change

- (7) A large number of government programmes implemented through single-sector users committees (called 'parallel bodies' by PRIA) are now in existence at the village level. Also present are other programmes that establish self-help-groups (SHGs), women's groups (like Mahila Mandals), youth clubs and other community-based organisations. To extend its penetration, a PRC needs to work with these bodies even as it concentrates on the core programmes.
- (8) Housing PRCs in *Panchayat Samiti* offices is an interesting development witnessed in Rajasthan. This helps establish an organic link with the block level elected representatives and the civil servants. This model may not be easily replicable everywhere. Nevertheless an effort can be made in this direction if found feasible.

Recommendations:

- (1) PRCs, as field-based-units, and PICs wherever they exist, have successfully provided the vital institutional support for programme implementation. However, an 18–24 month time period allowed is rather short. PRCs should normally be funded for a five-year period to match the PEVAC-to-PEVAC duration of a project phase.
- (2) A PRC should normally be able to penetrate all *Gram Panchayats* in a block. To that extent the number of full-time workers might have to be raised to at least three if not four.
- (3) PRC workers should be continuously exposed to training not only in components of the various core programmes but also in other subjects on which parallel bodies work in a particular region.
- (4) Increasing use of IT tools at the PRCs is recommended. Handling of large volumes of information, continuously updated would thereby be facilitated. It will also help PRCs provide services of various types to the villagers and elected representatives. Information on weather, agricultural inputs and markets, beneficiary linked programmes and their details, etc., can be facilitated by this means. Application forms of various types can be dispensed with ease. Eventually the PRCs can be networked with each other and the SRC. Internet access will add a whole new dimension to the programme content.
- (5) As all projects will eventually come to a close, during the next phase a careful strategy for allowing the PRCs to continue working should be finalised. The range of options could include RSOs continuing to run them with financial support from other sources, transfer to state institutions like SIRDs and regional training centers, transfer to local partners, etc.
- (6) The levying of charges for value added services provided by the PRCs should be examined and wherever found feasible implemented with sensitivity and care.
- (7) As the PRC staff is by and large drawn from the available pool of young men and women of the area, to attract and retain the best talent periodic raises in monetary compensation to them should be considered.

5 PRIA's Approach to Project Management and other related issues

In Chapter 4, the JRT has tried to evaluate the Project on its design, content and outcomes when seen against PRIA's declared mission for involving civil society organisations in the domain of local-self-government (para 4.21). In this chapter we consider other aspects of the Project as per the TOR. Findings related to the relevance of the Project, signs of an early impact and sustainability of results and the effectiveness and efficiency of project management are mentioned.

5.1 Findings

- (1) Continuation: The project as designed and implemented through the core programmes and the institutional support given through PRCs has been well received. The core programmes cover a range of interventions for building capacities and promote and inculcate a sense of ownership of institutions at the grassroots level. As emphasised earlier the task in terms of coverage to be achieved is gigantic and likely to take several years of active work to significantly influence the socio-political environment. However, this appears to have been substantially achieved through the design and implementation of the core programmes. We were told repeatedly that the core programmes should be allowed to remain without major changes in the next phase. At the same time flexibility to accommodate local priorities in the design should be further strengthened.
- (2) Mid Course Corrections: While the mid-term review and its recommendations were taken seriously by the RSOs it was felt that these were more in the nature of recommendations for strengthening the programme at local levels, and less for changing the design and content of the programme, which in any case as mentioned in (1) above should be allowed to remain as they are at present.
- (3) Monitoring and Evaluation: As the project grows older and goes from one phase to the next, demands for strong indicators on project outcomes are likely to increase, especially from the promoters. This project has now reached a stage where insistence for benchmarking against pre-determined set of outcomes is likely to get accentuated. Before further deliberating on this, mention must be made of the intensive interactive monitoring and feedback methodology followed by PRIA with its partners. This has served them well in helping inform programme implementation and towards evolving new strategies. It has also helped in learning from experiences across the states. Wherever possible quantification of results has also been insisted upon, in spite of the fact that this is difficult in a project that primarily addressed capacity building in non-formal situations (unlike in institution-based programmes where examinations, feedback reports etc. make it easier). Even so the experience of the past several years can help design a feedback and evaluation format in greater detail. PRCs can play a bigger role in this. Their feedback can be put up for concurrent evaluation by outside agencies on a selective basis.

Surveys even on a pilot scale, prior to the commencement of implementation, can give an indication of the state of awareness and the extent to which interventions would be necessary. This can help determine clear indicators to gauge the impact. Quantitative and qualitative measures can be considered for this purpose.

- (4) Project Outreach and Spread: This point has been debated at length in various forums from time to time. PRIA sees its role and responsibility as a national player whose strengths lie in research and advocacy. While it has derived useful field-level experience by running the project directly in some locations, it has overwhelmingly depended on seeding and promoting regional and local players for project implementation. It has also allowed them sufficient room to innovate and expand into other areas of related work, not necessarily financed through it. PRIA has even tailored project outreach

and expansion to the availability of suitable partners in various states. It is, therefore, difficult to suggest that PRIA should be asked to restrict this project to only a certain member of states and expand the outreach therein. What in the end would, therefore, determine the outreach and spread of the intervention is the size of programme funding available. However, there are certain caveats to this:

- (a) A PEVAC-to-PEVAC project schedule has its advantages.
 - (b) A PRC should cover all *Gram Panchayats* in a block.
 - (c) Within a district covered under the project at least two blocks should be covered through independent PRCs.
- (5) Project Management: PRIA has developed its core strengths in policy advocacy, programme strategising and design of core-interventions. This is done through high level and intensive interactions with government departments and other agencies both at the national and state levels. However, actual implementation in the field having been left to the RSOs, PRIA has developed a confederating structure of partners. This appears to have served the overall objective. On the one hand it has given PRIA the opportunity to become a national-level player while on the other it has indeed helped foster the development of very good regional organisations. Given the constraints of time a critical in-depth evaluation of the help and assistance provided by PRIA to its partners has not been easy. However the JRT did go into this question to the extent possible and found that management of the project has been undertaken with a great deal of continuous involvement on PRIA's part. Inputs and services provided to the partners were timely and efficient. This has been achieved without affecting the autonomous status of the partners.

5.2 Recommendations

- (1) Continuation: It should be reaffirmed that the Project will be continued. It should, as far as possible, be so designed that in a particular state, and within the state in a district/block, it should run from one election to the next (called earlier in the report as PEVAC-to-PEVAC).
- (2) Project Interventions and Core Programmes: Project interventions have been determined with care. The core programmes (which have been commented upon in detail) have been designed to implement these broad interventions. These should be allowed to continue into the next phase.
- (3) Monitoring & Feedback: PRIA should critically look at its monitoring feedback & methodology, which are by no means insufficient, to come up with a set of parameters both in quantifiable and qualitative terms. This would help the funding agencies to have a better understanding of the manner in which the project has progressed.
- (4) Project Outreach & Spread: While this will in the end depend upon the quantum of funding available, covering all major states in itself has merit. However, priority needs to be given to covering at least two if not three blocks in each district selected. Within a block the endeavour should be to reach all *Gram Panchayats* in a fairly extensive mode but at the same time it must be seen that the number of such *Panchayats* to be covered intensively is as large as possible. This is to facilitate the sustainability of outcomes.
- (5) An issue which deserves comment is related to the scaling up of programmes in a state from the present level. While local partners have been implementing the programme, there is also the need for a greater monitoring of their work. Where large NGOs are involved, PRIA's ability to keep an overall grasp over the situation should not be compromised by the size of the NGOs in question.
- (6) Project Management: PRIA should bring to bear upon the project its expertise in a large number of functional areas – for example, natural resource management. Ensuring involvement of parallel bodies at the village level with the *Gram Sabha* will call for training of personnel in this direction.

Annex I

Terms of Reference

An independent Joint Review of Sida support to the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA).

1. Introduction

PRIA is a national level NGO working on issues related to participatory training, governance, environmentally sustainable development and the civil society. Sida's support to PRIA started in 1995 for a package of activities to strengthen panchayati raj institutions across 7 states. In 1997 the programme was expanded to 11 states. Under the current support that started in 2000, PRIA is working across 18 states. The Ministry of Rural Development, the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), the Ford Foundation and Cordaid are other donors funding the programme. Sida's contribution is INR 15 million annually for two years.

2. Objective of the Joint Review

The Independent Joint Review is being planned in accordance with Article 6 of the Agreement between Sida and PRIA. The joint review will be more in the nature of an ex post evaluation and will attempt to assess systematically and objectively the project's relevance, performance and success to date. The joint review shall also be forward-looking, including comments on the continued relevance of the programme in its current form and suggest strategic thrust areas for future cooperation.

The main stakeholders of this joint review are PRIA, and the Development Co-operation Section (DCS) of the Embassy of Sweden in New Delhi.

3. Scope of the Joint Review

The joint review will cover all important aspects and components of PRIA's panchayati raj programme since 2000 as outlined in the project document. However, the joint review will also take into account the evolution of the panchayati raj programme since the signing of the first Agreement between PRIA and the DCS to date. The focus will be more on qualitative evolution rather than the increasing scale of the programme.

4. Issues to be addressed by the Joint Review

The joint review team shall particularly address the following issues:

- The continued relevance of the project (approach, objectives, modalities of implementation, etc.) with regard to the prevailing context;
- The project outputs with regard to the expected end-results;
- The effectiveness of the approach/strategy being used to produce these results;
- The efficiency of project management, including the quality, quantity and timeliness of delivery of inputs;
- The extent to which mid course corrections were undertaken based on internal the mid term review undertaken by PRIA;
- Early signs of potential impact and sustainability of results, including the contribution to capacity development;

On the basis of this assessment, the joint review team should identify problems and constraints, if any, and propose recommendations for follow-up action to consolidate project sustainability. A number of generic recommendations should also be made that have bearing beyond the project.

5. Products expected from the Joint Review

The joint review team will produce an **Independent Joint Review Report** of not more than 25 pages, containing the following six sections: (1) Executive summary; (2) The Project: design, objectives, and results; (3) The Joint Review: methodology; (4) findings; (5) conclusions and recommendations; and (6) lessons learned. The report should include a list of reference material as well as list of people interviewed.

The draft version of the report focussing on the findings and recommendations of the joint review team should be verbally presented to PRIA, Sida and other donors preferably by the 31st May 2002 or before. The final joint review report will be submitted to the DCS before 7 June 2002 in 5 bound hard copies, one unbound hard copy and one electronic copy (in MS Word or compatible software).

6. Methodology

As a first task, the joint review team will, in consultation with PRIA and the DCS, prepare a detailed scope of work and time schedule reflecting this ToR and present it to the DCS for approval.

The joint review team will carefully review all relevant documentation, including the original project document and the project progress reports.

The team will conduct interviews with relevant staff in PRIA, as well as other stakeholders in the activities undertaken.

7. Composition of the joint review team

The joint review team will be consisted of minimum two members designated jointly by PRIA and the DCS.

The team should possess demonstrable skills in evaluating capacity development projects as well as substantive experience from dealing with issues related to decentralisation in India. Excellent (English) oral and writing skills is essential.

The team leader is responsible for the conduct of the joint review team, for ensuring that the ToR is fully understood by all the team members, and for ensuring that the joint review report is completed in accordance with this ToR.

8. Implementation arrangements

The joint review will be carried out during three weeks in April/ May 2002. It is proposed that the joint review is carried out in four steps as follows:

- Documentation review (desk study) and preliminary consultations with the DCS and PRIA, including the development of a work plan
- Visit to the project sites, including collection of relevant written material as well as interviews with the staff of PRIA, and other stakeholders
- Analysis of the information collected and preparation of a first draft of the report
- Debriefing, information validation, and preparation of the final version of the report

PRIA shall provide reasonable assistance in providing logistical arrangements for the project visits and will be decided upon once a work plan has been developed.

Enclosures:

- a) Project document;
- b) Appraisal report of the project document;
- c) Mid term review report;
- d) Progress reports from the project;

Annex II

Persons met by the JRT in individual and Group Situations

(A) PERSONS MET AND INTERVIEWED

1. New Delhi

At PRIA

1. Mr. Rajesh Tandon
2. Mr. Satinder S. Sahni
3. Mr. Manoj Rai
4. Ms. Malini Nambiar
5. Ms. Dinoo Mathew

At the Ford Foundation

1. Dr. Mark Robinson

2. Madhya Pradesh

Government of Madhya Pradesh

1. Mr. Digvijay Singh, Chief Minister
2. Mr. Sudhir Nath, Principal Secretary, Panchayat & RD
3. Ms. Ajita Bajpai Pandey, Commissioner, Panchayats.
4. Mr. Ajit Kesari (Collector, Morena)

Samarthan

1. Dr. Yogesh Kumar
2. Ms. Bhavana Nagar
3. Ms. Richa Som
4. Mr. P. Suresh
5. Mr. Amit Khare
6. Mr. Manish Shrivastava
7. Ms. Roopali
8. Mr. Arun Shrivastava
9. Mr. Devendra Singh, Dharti Morena

Zilla Panchayat, Sehore

1. Mr. J.S. Arora, President and others including media representatives.

State Election Commission

1. Mr. G.S. Shukla, State Election Commissioner

Others

1. Mr. S.C. Behar, Chief Secretary (Rtd.)
2. Mr. Shyam Bhore
3. Ms. Sushmita Malaviya
4. Mr. H.P. Mishra
5. Prof. Chowdhary
6. Mr. H.M. Mishra
7. Mr. A. Chawla (DFID)
8. Mrs. Buch
9. Mr. Anwar Jaffri

3. Uttar Pradesh

Sahabhaji Shikshan Kendra

1. Mr. Ashok K. Singh
2. Mr. Naveen Kapoor
3. Mr. Rajesh Jamvar
4. Mr. Vikas Patel
5. Mr. Prem Kumar Singh
6. Mr. T. Thomson

Voluntary Development Organisations (VDOs)

1. Mr. Luv Kush, Amar Shahid Chetna Sansthan, Mau
2. Mr. R.P. Tiwari, Sahabhaji Grameen Vikas Samiti, Mirzapur
3. Mr. V.C. Maurya, Indian Rural Technology Development Institute, Prajapgarh
4. Mr. Dhrut Singh Margashree, Jhansi
5. Mr. Aftab Alam, Manav Sam, aj Kalyan Seva Sansthan, Baharaich
6. Mr. Ram Bhuvan, Jana Kalyan Sansthan, Gorakhpur
7. Mr. Amrish Kumar, Gram Unmesh Sansthan, Banda
8. Mr. Avadhesh Gautam, Panchayat Adhyayan Sandharbh Kendra, Banda
9. Mr. Radhe Krishna, Samarthan, Jana Kalyan Sansthan, Jalaun
10. Mr. Daulat Ram, Bhartiya Jana Seva Ashram Jaunpur.

Others

1. Dr. Yash Pal Singh, Former State Election Commissioner
2. Mr. Rakesh Chaturvedi, OSD, Panchayat Raj Deptt. Govt. of U.P.
3. Prof. Brij Chauhan, Head, Deptt. of Law, Lucknow University.

4. Rajasthan

UNNATI

1. Mr. Binoy Acharya
2. Ms. Shompa Batabyal
3. Mr. Sumit Misra

Marndhar Ganga Society, Magkalav

1. Mr. Bharat Kumar Bhati

5. Himachal Pradesh

PRIA – HP

1. Mr. Ajay Mohapatra

District Administration

1. Mr. Subhashish Panda, CEO, ZP
2. Mr. S.R. Sharma, Distt. Panchayat Officer.

Voluntary Development Organisations

New Himalayan Organisation for People's Education (NEW HOPE)

1. Mr. Hemraj Sharma
2. Mr. Vivek Sharma
3. Ms. Bindu Sharma
4. Mr. Manjit Walia
5. Mr. Ashwini Misra
6. Ms. Snehlata Katoch

Samaj Sewa Parishad (SSP)

1. Mr. Harekrishna Murari

People's Awareness, Rural and Urban Awakening Society (PARAS)

1. Mr. Sanjay Parmar

Urban Tribal and Hill's Advancement Society (UTHAN)

1. Mr. Ramesh

Association for Social & Hills Advancement (ASHA)

1. Mr. Sushil Sharma
2. Ms. Sunita Sharma

6. Kerala

SAHAYI

1. Mr. G. Placid
2. Mr. P.M. Dev

Others

1. Mr. S.M. Vijayanand, Secretary, Planning Board, Govt. of Kerala
2. Mr. Ramachandran Pillai (Asst. Professor, Institute of Management and Government, Trivandrum
3. Additional Secretary, Ombudsman's Office, Trivandrum
4. Secretary, Kerala Gandhi Smarak Nidhi
5. Gram Panchayat President (SC), Kollam District
6. Vice President, Shastramkota Block Panchayat (lady)
7. Local farmer (Kollam)
8. Ms. Devi (Gram Panchayat representative, Kollam District)
9. Mr. Santhosh (Gram Panchayat representative, Kollam District)
10. Mr. T.A.Varghese, Programmeme Coordinator, NGO Programme, Kerala
11. Mr. M.J. Joseph (NGO)
12. President, Gram Panchayat, woman (Alleppy)
13. A Self-Help Group (Alleppy)
14. Woman Gram Panchayat representative, Alleppy
15. Santhigram (NGO); group of functionaries.

7. Andhra Pradesh

PRIA:

1. Ms. Shagun Mehrotra
2. Mr. Anil Vaddiraju.

Professor K. Sreenivasalu

NGOs (Hyderabad)

DAPPU

Dalit Bahujan Front

Loksatta

PEACE

Mahbubnagar

Mr. Ramalu (SC Sarpanch, Tirumalai Gram Panchayat)

Up-sarpanch of same Gram Panchayat as above

Up-sarpanch of another Gram Panchayat

Other gram Panchayat representatives (three persons)

Two reporters for local newspapers

Divisional Panchayat Officer

Former I/C Divisional Panchayat Officer
Mr. Nagendra Swamy (Director, Villages in Partnership)
Mandal Parishad Development Officer
Woman Sarpanch
Two Women representatives (GP same as that of woman sarpanch) representative
Gram Panchayat Secretary.

B. PEOPLE MET IN GROUP SITUATIONS

1. Madhya Pradesh

Village Khamalia, Gram Panchayat Khamalia, Block Sehare

Mr. Manohar Singh Rajput, Sarpanch and around eighty others including women, women representatives, SHGs etc.

Village Mainpura, Block Sehare

50 persons including women, women representatives etc.

2. Uttar Pradesh

Panchayat Resource Centre, Sidhanli, Distt. Sitapur

Mr. T. Thomson and others.

Village Dahudpur, GP Dahudpur, Block Kasmanda

30 villagers including mainly women and women representatives from dalit families.

Village Bhahuri, GPO Ganeshpur, Block Kasmanda

Village level Panchayat Information Centre

20 villagers including dalit representatives.

Kshetra Panchayat, Block Kasmanda at Kamalapur

1. Mr. Ram Karan Rawat, President, Kshetra Panchayat
2. Mr. Jamunalal Awasthi, Pradhan and President, Block Level Association of Village Pradhans, Others including Pradhans.

3. Rajasthan

Panchayat Resource Centre, Mandor

1. Mr. Sandeep Sarada
2. Ms. Rekha Vaishnav

Gram Panchayat, Mankalav and Dalit Resource Centre

Sarpanch from seven Panchayats, all dalit and including three women

Gram Panchayat, Bilaspur

Mr. Mukana Ram Singharia, Dalit Sarpanch and other members.

Gram Panchayat Joliyali

Mr. Sundaram, Subedar (Rtd.) Indian Army and Sarpanch and others.

4. Himachal Pradesh

Panchayat Resource Centre, Khadul, Block Sulah

Members of PRIA's partner organisations

Gram Panchayat, Samba, Block Sulah

1. Mr. Ravinder Kumar, Up-Pradhan
2. Ms. Pabna Devi, Panch and twenty others, mainly women and women representatives.

Annex III

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