

Bridging the Global with the Local

Against the backdrop of the need to operationalize the SSF Guidelines in a participatory manner, the role of the local governance system of India cannot be overemphasized

As a complement to the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has developed the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines). The objectives of the SSF Guidelines are to be achieved “...by empowering small-scale fishing communities, including both men and women, to participate in decision-making processes”, paying “... particular attention... to decentralized and local government structures directly involved in governance and development processes together with small-scale fishing communities...”. The CCRF and the SSF Guidelines are global instruments aimed at states and fishing communities, in particular, towards long-term sustainable use of fisheries resources and sustainable development.

Although the diversity of regions and communities is a challenge to the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, the local governance system of India is conducive to operationalising the SSF Guidelines at the local level. The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) of the Ministry of Panchayat Raj (MoPR), initiated since 2015, is relevant in this context. The GPDP, prepared through a participatory, bottom-up process, can be an effective tool for implementing the SSF Guidelines, especially in light of the People’s Plan campaign of Kerala.

Local governance in India

With the passing of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian constitution

in 1992, both the rural and urban local self- government institutions (LSGIs) in India came into force in 1993 with the twin objectives of local economic development and social justice. Following the federal system, in addition to Union (Tier I) and the states (Tier II), the LSGIs are enshrined in the Indian Constitution as Tier III. Local governments are empowered to form a Gram Sabha (Village Assembly), a platform at the grassroots to ensure people’s participation.

People’s plan campaign

The state of Kerala has a mechanism in place to benefit traditional fishing communities at the local level. The Government of Kerala introduced decentralization through the People’s Plan campaign in 1996 and took steps to address the livelihood issues of small-scale fisher people. The Working Groups (sectoral planning committees of LSGIs) envisaged as part of the People’s Plan campaign provide a collective platform for the elected representatives, officials and local experts to develop plans. The provision to constitute a Working Group on Fisheries is also of benefit to the fisheries sector. Matsya Bhavan was set up in 1997 to bring together the services of multiple government agencies in fisheries to benefit marine fishing communities, as well as to facilitate the formulation of Local Plans in the fisheries sector.

Several studies conducted by the authors of this article in the late 1990s and early 2000s showed that the Matsya Bhavan should be complemented with an exclusive platform for fisher people, called Matsya Sabha (Assembly of Fisher People) for effectively

*This article is by **J B Rajan** (jbrajano7@gmail.com), Associate Professor, Kerala Institute for Local Administration (KILA), India and **Haribabu TP** (seapen.hari@gmail.com), Freelance Researcher on Coast and Development, India*

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46 ICSF-KILA National workshop on panchayats (local self Governments) and the SSF Guidelines, Kila, Thrissur, India on 5-6 November 2019. To ensure greater participation of fishing communities it is desirable to create coastal constituencies and reserve the seats

representing the fisheries sector in local planning. These studies recommended re-aligning Matsya Bhavan and creating and mandating Matsya Sabha as a subset of the Gram Sabha for effective participation of the fisher people in the planning process. These communities often found themselves marginalized in the Gram Sabha deliberations, since they were less articulate about their issues in the presence of dominant members of the majority non-fishing communities.

Following the above recommendation, at the beginning of the 11th Five Year Plan (2007-2012), the Kerala Institute for Local Administration (KILA) proposed a Matsya Sabha at the ward level (the smallest geographic segment of the gram panchayat) in coastal areas to attain the true spirit of participatory and deliberative democracy. The state government, during the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-17), accepted and implemented the proposal. Matsya Sabha was set up in 2012 to strengthen democratic participation of traditional fisher people in the planning process of LSGIs. Matsya Bhavan is to regularly report the decisions of the Matsya Sabha to the Working Group on Fisheries.

Deliberative democracy through Matsya Sabha

While the Gram Sabha is an all-encompassing forum, representing the entire geographical ward and its population with electoral franchise and responsible for all development demands of the ward that comes under the purview of the LSGIs, the Matsya Sabha is to ensure that fisher people have equal rights similar to other citizens of India and that they can exercise their rights and benefit from funds earmarked for fisheries and fisher people.

Fisher people component plan

Although there are several divisions and sub-divisions within the fisher people, they are, overall, at the bottom of the caste hierarchy of Kerala. As per the Kerala government classification, fisher people belong to the other eligible communities (OECs) or other backward communities (OBCs) list. This reveals their social and economic backwardness. Owing to this, fisher people have time and again argued for the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. This has not been heeded but there is legitimacy in arguing that they should be considered as 'other weaker

sections' and be accorded special drivers and economic packages such as the 'Fisher People Component Plan' (FCP) under LSGIs. It would be similar to the Women Component Plan (WCP) of LSGIs whereby 10 per cent of the plan outlay, at least, is to be earmarked for addressing issues related to women.

In conjunction, it is necessary to address the absence of a proper monitoring mechanism of FCP. Although the Working Group is entrusted with the task of monitoring during the implementation of the plan, measurable targets and indicators are yet to be developed along the lines of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are broader aspirations but the attainment of these SDGs is monitored through measurable targets and indicators (169 targets and 300 indicators for 17 Goals). Operationalising the SSF Guidelines at the local level could get a boost from incorporating measurable targets and indicators.

Delimiting electoral constituency boundaries

In the present electoral scenario, traditional fisher people cannot enjoy an equal position in any constituency in LSGIs' elections. Fisher people form a minority in the wards because of limitations of constituency demarcation. Each electoral ward boundary (as in LSGIs) is drawn vertically to the coast, whereas the fisher people's habitations are along and parallel to the coast. The majority land area in this scenario falls into the interior and away from the coastal stretch. Unsurprisingly, the non-fishing population constitutes the majority in coastal wards. This kind of ward demarcation leads to the denial of the traditional and historic rights of fishing communities. The scenario can only be changed if the constituencies are re-drawn, consistent with the fisher people's habitations. The Task Force on Livelihood-Secure Fishing Communities of Kerala, constituted by State Planning Board in 1997, had identified the gravity of this issue and made recommendations to mitigate the situation to ensure livelihood security. The Task Force observes the following: "To ensure greater participation of fishing communities in the democratic process at all levels, it is desirable

to create coastal constituencies and reserve the seats for members of the fishing communities." The delimitation demand of the fisher people is just and seeks to correct an unfair representation pattern that has been in place for decades. An acceptance of this demand is yet to be made.

Next steps

In conclusion, as an effective umbrella, local governance in India and GPDP offer an ideal opportunity to operationalize the SSF Guidelines amongst marine fishing communities. Each coastal state in India has its own vision and policy regarding local governance and there is no uniform implementation plan. The platforms initiated by Kerala—the People's Plan campaign in general and the fisheries sector-specific platforms in particular—would enable a participatory governance system as envisaged by the SSF Guidelines. Combining these platforms is necessary to address stark realities at the ground level. Also, targets and indicators in relation to the SSF Guidelines need to be developed. Piloting these in a sample selection of fishing villages may be an immediate agenda item to be taken up for action. ↴

For more



<https://igssf.icsf.net/en/page/1097-India%20Local%20Self-Governments%20and%20SSF%20Guidelines.html>

The ICSF - KILA National Workshop on Local Self-Governments and SSF Guidelines, Thrissur, Kerala, 5-6 November, 2019

https://igssf.icsf.net/images/ICSF_FAO%20PROJECT1/IND%20001bLocal%20Self%20Government%20workshop%20Report.doc

Workshop draft report

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nb1P6t3cwRg&feature=youtu.be>

Inaugural Address: Shri. S. Venkatesapathy, Director of Fisheries, Government of Kerala (Video)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-9Wuz6J_YY&feature=youtu.be

Valedictory Address: Shri. S. M. Vijayanand, Chairman, Sixth State Finance Commission, Government of Kerala (VIDEO)