



Enabling people to govern themselves

Context:

- The author Arun Maira, a former member of the Planning Commission, argues for a more decentralized form of governance model in India.



Background:

- Human civilisation has witnessed the evolution of institutions to manage public affairs. The evolution was to enable human societies to produce better outcomes for their citizens.
- The institutions of parliamentary democracy which were non-existent 400 years ago have become the dominant form of government the world over.
- Institutions of global governance, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, which did not exist even 100 years ago, have a critical role to play in global governance.
- The author argues that the existing institutional structure which has been put through a stress test by the current global health and economic crises has failed to live up to the expectations. **The pandemic has brought to light the existing flaws in current governance institutions.**
- Breakdowns in subsystems during the pandemic such as health care, logistics, business, finance, and administration had to be managed at the same time. The complexity of handling so many subsystems at the same time has overwhelmed governance.
- Solutions for one subsystem have backfired on other subsystems.
- Enforcement of lockdowns to make it easier to manage the health crisis has led to economic distress simultaneously.
- The diversion of resources to focus on the threat posed by COVID-19 has increased vulnerabilities due to death from other diseases, and even from malnutrition in many parts of India.

15.07.2020

Wednesday



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- There seems to be a **mismatch in the design of governance institutions at all levels with the challenges they are required to manage.**
- The author argues that the government must devolve power to citizens in villages and towns in India for them to govern their own affairs.

What are the arguments in favour of decentralization?

Associated studies:

- Eminent personalities like Gandhiji and his economic adviser J.C. Kumarappa, E.F. Schumacher and Elinor Ostrom (the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Economics, in 2009) have emphasized the **effectiveness of local governance systems** through their studies. These **studies offer scientific explanations** for why local systems solutions are the best, if not the only way to solve complex systemic problems.

Constitutional requirement:

- In 1992, India amended its constitution with the intent to strengthen grassroots-level democracy by decentralising governance and empowering local administrative bodies. The objective was to create local institutions that were democratic, autonomous, financially strong, and capable of formulating and implementing plans for their respective areas and providing decentralised administration to the people.
- **The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment of the Indian Constitution gives recognition and protection to local governments.**
- The passing of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments made it mandatory for each state to constitute rural and urban local governments.

Interconnectedness of issues:

- The global challenges listed in the **17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** of the United Nations, are **systemic challenges that are interconnected with each other.**
- Environmental, economic, and social issues cannot be separated from each other and solved by experts in silos or by agencies focused only on their own problems. The knowledge of all the involved aspects must be combined to



come up with the most suitable solutions apt for local conditions which would not be possible in a centralized form of government.

- In fact, a good solution to one can create more problems for others, as government responses to the novel coronavirus pandemic have revealed. This would require constant monitoring. A **decentralized form of government allows for better monitoring.**

Suitability to local conditions:

- Though global collaboration aids the development of human society, the solutions being propounded for human society must fit the specific conditions of each country and of each locality within countries too. **Solutions must be local.**
- A major aspect of the decentralized form of government is the awareness of the administration of the ground realities which would be in a better position to formulate policies aligned with the actual local conditions as compared to that in a centralized form of government. This ensures **better policy formulation** which can be more effective.

Participatory governance:

- Decentralisation helps make governance more participatory in nature.
- It is based on the notion that **people need to have a say in decisions that affect their lives.** The centralized form of governance or top-down approach to governance resembles a paternalist government taking care of its wards.
- Apart from policy formulation, policy implementation is also equally important for which the participation of the people is critical. For the local people to support the implementation of solutions, they must believe the solution is the right one for them, and not a solution thrust upon them by outside experts. Therefore, they must be active contributors of knowledge for, and active participants in, the creation of the solutions, which is possible only in a decentralized form of governance.

Inclusivity:

- Decentralisation helps make governance more inclusive.

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- The evolution of **community-based public health and the self-help group movements** helps ensure the development of the most vulnerable and downtrodden sections of society.
- The availability of resources at the local levels will **ensure availability and accessibility** to even the poor sections.
- The 73rd and 74th amendment of the Indian Constitution, providing for reservation for the SC/ST and women in the administration, has helped ensure their participation in governance which will have a bearing on the policies relevant to these sections.

Emerging evidence:

- Emerging evidence from states in India such as Kerala, and some countries such as Vietnam and Taiwan, show that they have been able to perform better than others during the ongoing pandemic.
- A hypothesis is that those **states and countries in which local governance was stronger have done much better than others**. This needs to be evaluated further by social and political scientists looking for insights into design principles for good governance systems that can solve basic problems being faced by human society.

Conclusion:

- In the memorable phrase of President Abraham Lincoln, **democracy is government of the people, by the people, and for the people**. While a government instituted through elections based on universal adult franchise and working for the welfare of the people qualifies as government being of the people and for the people, it still does not effectively represent a government by the people. Governance of the people must be not only for the people. It must be by the people too.
- **The government has to support and enable people to govern themselves**, to fully realise the vision of 'government of the people, for the people, by the people'. An important role for the government is to '**enable governance**'.
- The author argues that a local system of governance is the only way humanity will be able to meet the new ecological and humanitarian challenges looming over it in the 21st century.