

Local level Training-cum-Advocacy Workshop

International Trade and National Development Strategy in India *Voices from the Ground*

12 June 2008, Kolkata, West Bengal

1. Introduction

CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre (CUTS – CRC) with the support of, CUTS Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment (CUTS CITEE) and the Royal Norwegian Embassy, New Delhi, organised a day-long Training cum Advocacy meeting for Farmers, Farmer leaders, Civil Society Organisations and Panchayat Representatives under one of their ongoing projects titled “*Mainstreaming International Trade and National Development Strategy in India*”.

“*Mainstreaming International Trade into National Development Strategy*” (MINTDEV) is a pilot study being conducted in Bangladesh and India. The overall goal of the project is to establish upward and downward linkages between the grassroot stakeholders (viz. common villagers, panchayat officials, farmers, farmers groups and grassroot civil society organizations) and the policymakers (both at the local and national level) so as to integrate people’s views and concerns on issues of linkages between international trade and human development into the policy making process.

The one day workshop organized in Kolkata, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of culture, Golapark, is a follow – up activity to effectively address the major information gaps in the decision making process as revealed from the field survey of four hundred agricultural households spread across four districts of the state namely – Hooghly, Purulia, Malda and Jalpaiguri. The survey had also taken into account the views and concerns about the various government officials and people’s representatives who are considered to be the key players for facilitating effective information flow and decision flow between the grassroot stakeholders and central policy makers. Major highlights of the various sessions have been explained below.

2. The Participants

The workshop was attended by twenty five participants who included, farmers, member of different self help groups and civil society organisations from three districts of West Bengal. Representation from the district of Jalpaiguri was missing because of the Gorkhaland movement. Two resource persons with demonstrated expertise in their respective fields conducted various sessions of the workshop. Prof. Nabinananda Sen, Reader, University of Calcutta handled the session titled “International Trade and Indian Agriculture”. Sanchayan Pan who is the capacity building co-ordinator of the Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) cell, conducted two sessions. In his first session he explained the structure and functioning of the three tier Panchayat system; and in his second session he tried to simplify the various aspects of two very important schemes implemented through the Gram Panchayat – National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and Swarnajayanti Gramin Swarozgar Yojna (SGSY) both having direct relationship with poverty reduction at the grassroot.

3. Inaugural Session

Arnab Ganguly (AG) from CRC gave a brief introduction to the participants about the major objectives and main findings of the field survey undertaken under the above-mentioned project. After a brief welcome speech he explained the positive relationship between international trade and poverty reduction, highlighting the need for right complementary policies and associated institutions to be in place. He further added that though theoretically the trickle down effects of international trade can lead to development of a nation, yet in practice, existence of such a relationship is questionable. Absence of such mechanisms manifests itself in misconceptions about the implications of globalisation process; existence of quite a few government schemes, which do not cater to local needs; lack of social and physical infrastructure at the grassroots etc. With such a backdrop the project set out with the following objectives:

- a) Ensure and enhance positive linkages between trade and human development;
- b) Foster equity and accountability of the national trade policy; and
- c) Enhance a more coherent civil society voice in the formulation and implementation of national foreign trade policy and in its linkages with national development strategy

Having shared the broad project objectives, AG presented some of the major findings of the field survey and then moved on to explain the purpose of the training cum advocacy workshop.

Major findings of the field survey are:

- a) At the local level, there is lack of awareness among the agricultural households regarding globalization and the various opportunities and threats thereof;
- b) A majority of the grassroots stakeholders are not clear about the role and responsibilities of the gram Panchayats and its various officials;
- c) The grassroots stakeholders are also not aware of the various safeguard mechanisms (such as, NREGS, SGSY etc.) provided through the panchayats to phase out the various adverse effects of globalization and /or how to avail those.



*Figure 1 Inaugral Session: L to R –
Nabinanda Sen, and Arnab Ganguly*

Purpose of the training cum advocacy workshop:

- a) To demystify the implications of International Trade for the Indian agricultural sector
- b) Explain the roles and responsibilities of the various PRI officials
- c) Give an overview of the various pro – poor schemes implemented through the Gram Panchayats, with special emphasis on those having potential for employment generation and poverty reduction viz. – National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and Swarnajayanti Gramin Swarozgar Yojna (SGSY).

After explaining the project objectives, the major findings and the purpose of the training cum advocacy workshop, AG requested Professor Nabinanda Sen (NS) to explain the concept of International Trade and its various implications for the agriculture sector in India.

4. Second Session

4.1. International Trade and Indian Agriculture

NS explained International Trade and its impact on agriculture to the participants in colloquial Bengali language. First of all he explained why and how international trade occurs among different countries and what is meant by Globalisation. To make things easily understandable to the participants, NS at first pointed out the various measures taken by the Government of India after the year 1991, which marks the starting point of the structural adjustment programmes in the Indian Economy. He further added that the year 1995 had witnessed the beginning of a new trade regime under the purview of the newly found World Trade Organisation (WTO). World Trade Organization (WTO) unlike its ancestor General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) is a properly established rules-based inter-governmental body governing and regulating international trade in goods and services. Depending upon the major areas open for negotiation in the Uruguay Round, the main WTO agreements can be divided into the following categories:



- a) Agreement on Agriculture (AoA)
- b) Agreement on Textile and clothing
- c) Agreement on Trade Related Investment Measures (TRIMS)
- d) Agreement on Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS)

The two very important features of AoA as pointed out by NS were:

Figure 2 Second Session: L to R – Nabinanda Sen. and Arnab Ganguly

- ❖ Market Access i.e. abolition of import quota and other barriers to fair competition; replace non-tariff barriers with equivalent tariffs which are subject to reduction over the subsequent periods
- ❖ Export Subsidies i.e. reduction and subsequent withdrawal of subsidies provided to the domestic producers to safeguard them against the global price fluctuations and also to encourage to export a particular product.

After explaining the AoA, NS further added that the ground reality is, despite of these provisions the developed countries are still maintaining a high degree of domestic support to their products and the tug of war between the two worlds is regarding dismantling these supports. While the developing and the less developed world are reducing their respective subsidies those of the developed world are yet to make any significant reduction. It was expected that with the removal of trade distorting measures, agricultural exports from the developing countries will increase. This did not happen. In fact, India has on the other hand seen a massive increase in the imports of

agricultural commodities and products - from about Rs5,000 crore in 1995 to over Rs15,000 crore in 1999-2000 - a three-fold increase.

He explained that globalisation is not only about selling goods and services worldwide rather its main objective was to promote free trade in goods and services. However NS argued that though exports from India, in various goods and services had increased in the post reform period yet agricultural sector as a whole had to face deep crisis. At present while on one hand the farmers are facing various problems viz. diminishing farm productivity, secular decline in the international price of food grains, declining government expenditure in the farm sector, increase in the price of inputs, etc. on the other they had to purchase foodgrains at a higher price from the market. Farm debt and farmers suicides are the most obvious indicators of the present agrarian crisis in the country.

NS opined that though many experts and officials claim that in India subsidies that are provided to agriculture is negative (against the upper limit of ten per cent) and it can still be raised, in reality, India is committed to do away with agricultural subsidies under the Structural Adjustment Programme of the World Bank and the IMF. In any case, India provides only one billion dollar worth of indirect subsidies to 110 million farming families which is nothing more than a piecemeal. It was anticipated that due to reduction in domestic support in developed countries, cereal production would shift from developed countries to developing countries. Empirical evidence, however, shows that such a trend is not at all visible. In other words, while the developing countries shift from cereals to cash crops like flowers and vegetables, they are left with no option but to import staple foods.

However in spite of the negative implications on the agricultural sector NS did acknowledged the fact that benefits of globalization have been felt in the Horticulture and Floriculture sectors. These products are being exported at a large scale and the farmers are deriving profit from such export.

Towards the end of his session NS touched upon different issues such as contract farming, sanitary and phyto – sanitary measures, intellectual property rights and patents.

After pointing out the various opportunities and threats of globalization NS concluded by stressing the need for empowering the Gram Panchayats to design and implement developmental schemes especially for the agricultural sector. He admitted that though this may be a time taking process yet until and unless the target is achieved up linking and down linking between the grassroot stakeholders and the policy makers will not be possible.

4.2. Know your Gram Panchayat

As pointed out earlier, there is an urgent need to make people at the grassroot aware about the various functions of the Gram Panchayat and its officials. Mr.Sanchayan Pan (SP), Capacity Building Coordinator, Strengthening Rural Decentralisation (SRD) Cell was invited to give training to the participants on various issues related to Gram Panchayats including its composition, structure, functioning and linkage with the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishads.

SP began his presentation with a map of West Bengal which has nineteen districts. Out of these nineteen districts, he selected the Burdwan district which is further subdivide into a number of blocks. Moving in this fashion he arrived at a village contained in the Palsona Gram Panchayat of the Katwa – 2 Block. The idea contained in this presentation was to make the participants aware about the three tier Panchayati Raj System.

Next SP pointed out some of the very basic information, which every resident in a Gram Panchayat area should know. They were:

- a) The geographical area and location of the Gram Panchayat
- b) Total population of the Gram Panchayat
- c) Total number of mouzas in the Gram Panchayat
- d) Total number of Gram Sansads in the Gram Panchayat (According to the Panchayat Election, 2008) and the number of men and women Gram Panchayat members. Number of Gram Panchayat member/s is usually calculated by dividing the total number of voters in any gram Panchayat by nine hundred.



Figure 3 Second Session: Sanchayan Pan

The general structure of a Gram Panchayat has been depicted in Figure 4.2.1. It consists of the Pradhan who is considered to hold the apex position in a Gram Panchayat. Others include the Upa – Pradhan, the Executive Assistant, The Gram Panchayat Secretary, The Job Assistant etc. Apart from all these positions a Gram Panchayat also consist of five sub – committees each of which is under a co-ordinator. The Pradhan himself is the co-ordinator of the Finance and Planning sub – committee.

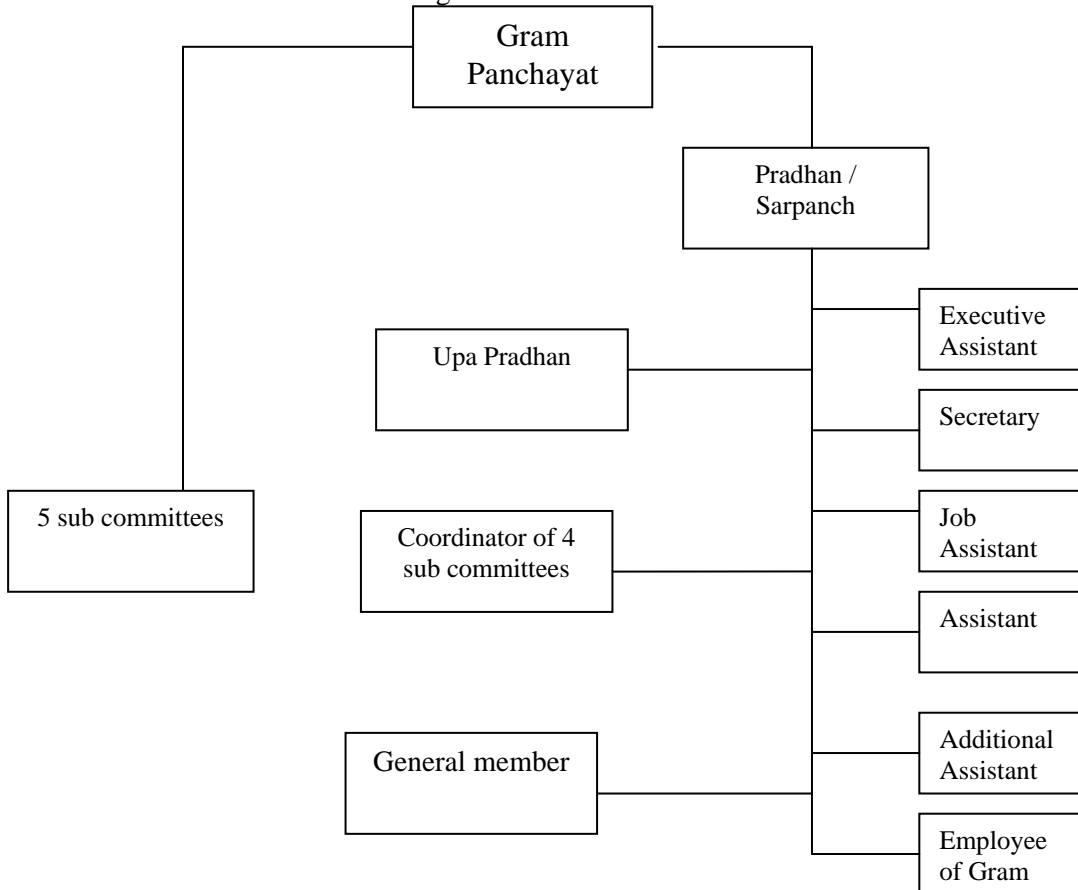


Figure 4.2.1 Structure of a Gram Panchayat

Prior to the seventy third constitutional amendment the Pradhan used to look after all the issues related to agriculture, animal husbandry, finance and planning, education etc. But the decentralisation drive had opted for setting up of sub – committees each responsible for looking after a specific area viz. agriculture, health and education, finance and planning, industry and infrastructure, women and child development. Figure 4.2.2 and Figure 4.2.3 shows the various sub – committees formed under a Gram Panchayat and the structure of a subcommittee respectively. Out of the five sub – committees the Finance and Planning sub – committee is the apex body which is at the top of all the other four sub – committees.

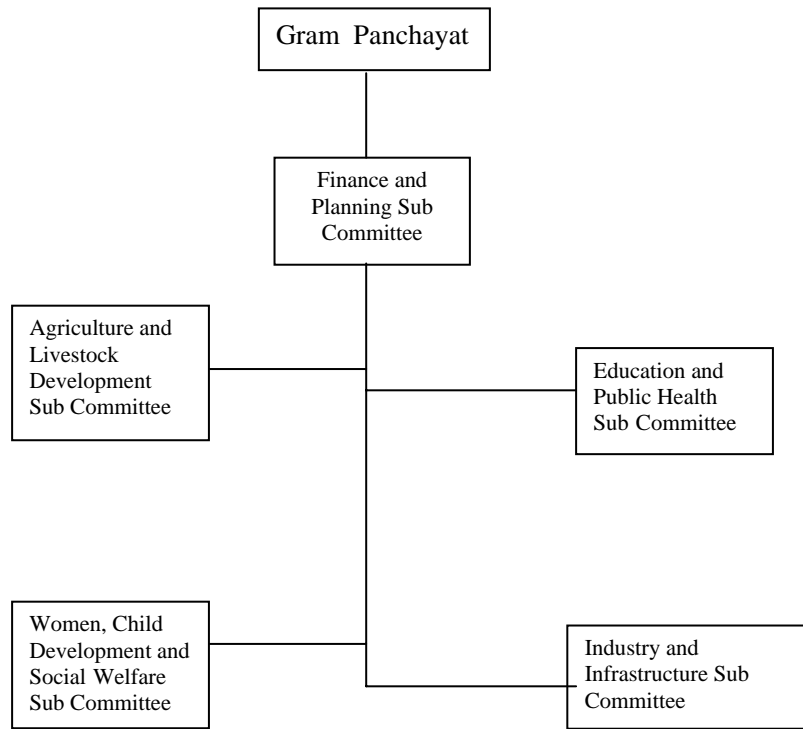


Figure 4.2.2 Different Sub – committees in a Gram Panchayat

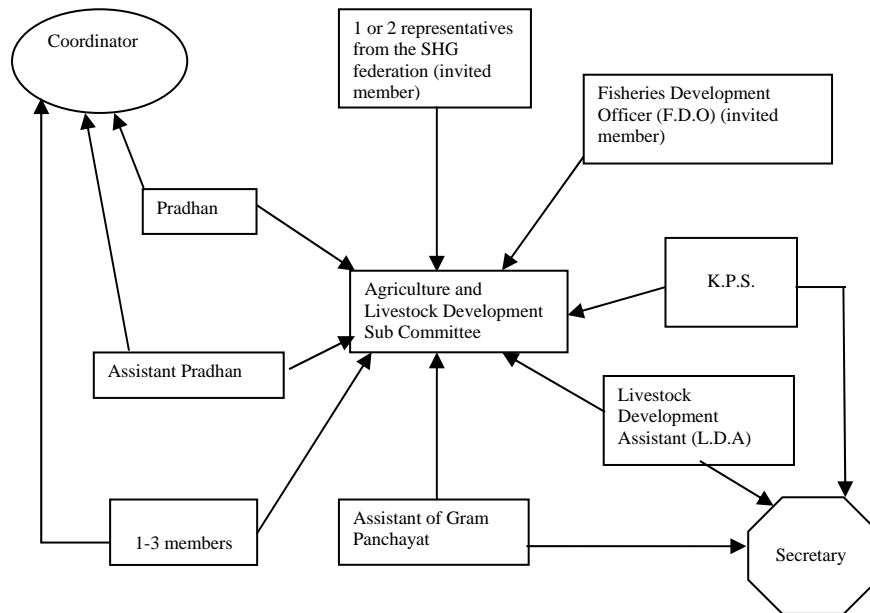


Figure 4.2.3 Structure of the Sub – Committee for Agriculture and Livestock Development

After a detailed discussion on the sub – committees SP switched over to discuss the salient features of a Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS) also termed as the Village Development Committee. It is the smallest unit in an administrative map having representation from the peoples representatives, member of the political party which is in the opposition, members of various Self Help Groups, school teachers and the common voters in the ward. The seventy third amendment of the Indian Constitution had made formation of GUS mandatory in each ward. It meets twice a year - once in November and another in May and common villagers are free to participate in those meetings.

After a detailed discussion on the Gram Panchayt, SP explained the structure of Panchayat Samities and the Zilla Parishads. The intent was to highlight the linkages among the three tiers of the Panchayat system. He demonstrated the link with the help of the following diagram, Figure 4.2.4.

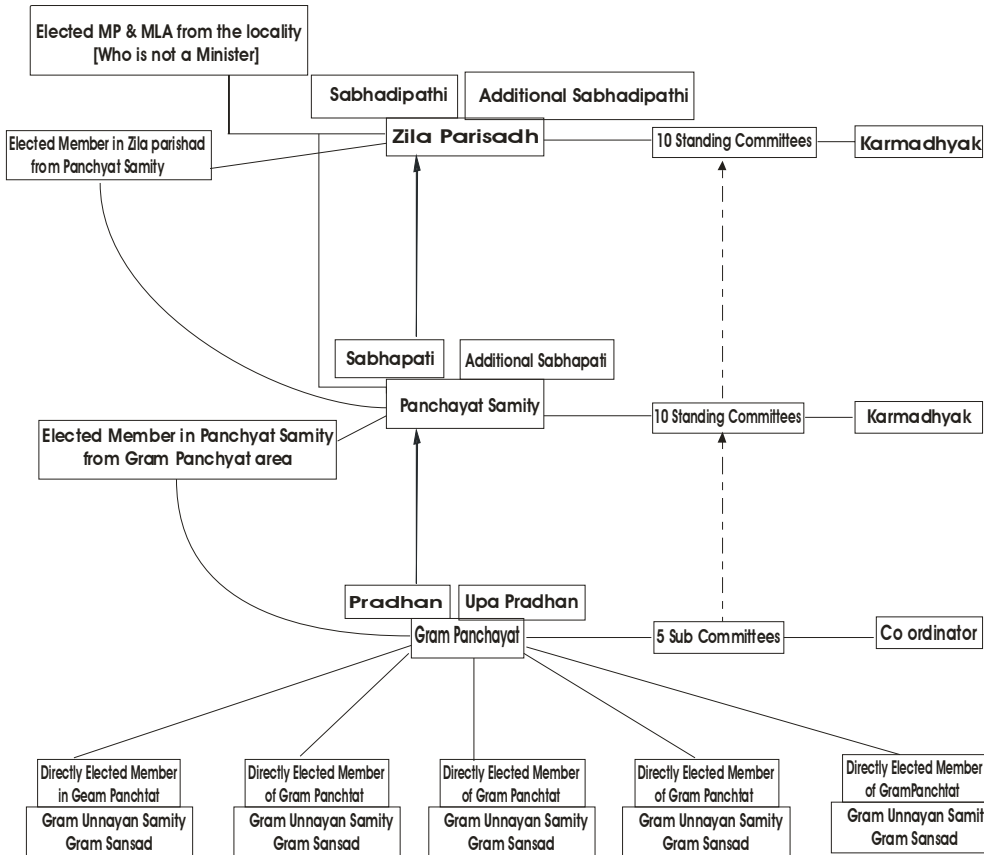


Figure 4.2.4 Linkages between the three tiers of the Panchayat System

The first link between the Gram Panchayat, the Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishad is the Gram Panchayat Pradhan who is a member of the Panchayat Samiti and can attend Panchayat Samiti meetings. Sabhapati of the Panchayat Samiti in turn is a member of the Zilla Parishad and hence can put forward the various grassroots issues before the Sabhadipathi of the Zilla Parishad and request for prompt actions. Since local legislators (MLA) and Member of the Parliament (MP) can attend Zilla Parishad meetings, they can also take the issue forward to the State Government and the Central Government.



Figure 4 Group Discussion

SP further added that the sequence of the different meetings are such that outcomes of one meeting can fit into that of the other. Elaborating on this he pointed out that while the GUS meetings are held in November and May, that of the Gram Sabha meetings are held during December. The Gram Sabha meetings are followed by the Panchayat Samiti meetings in January and June. The Zilla Parishad meetings are held in February and July.

Thus he concluded that, given the present three tier Panchayati system, the Constitution has made provisions for effective channels of information flow from the grassroots to the policy makers and vice versa.

5. Introduction to the some of the social security nets provided by the Gram Panchayats

Having discussed the salient features of a Gram Panchayat and its linkages with the other tiers, SP went on to make the participants aware about the two most important schemes implemented by the Gram Panchayats – The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which guarantees to provide one hundred days of employment to each of the families seeking work; and Swarnajayanti Gramin Swarozgar Yojna (SGSY) which aims at improving the socio – economic conditions of the below poverty line (BPL) families.

In order to make the session interactive, at first the participants were divided into small groups. Then a handout carrying information about the schemes was distributed among the groups. Each of the groups were given an hour to go through the handouts, discuss those among themselves so that every one in the group understands what is written in those handouts.



Figure 5 Quiz Contest

As a next step, a quiz contest was carried out with the groups. During the question answer session SP selected the respondents from each group, so that only one person from each group can answer once. At the end it emerged that even the shyest participant pro actively participated in the contest in the urge to make his group emerge out as a winner.

6. Evaluation of the workshop

After the quiz session was over, an evaluation form was distributed among the participants to get their feedback about the workshop and also to know whether they had understood the overall objective and proceedings of the workshop. Those who could not write expressed their views verbally. Close analysis of the feedback form revealed that the participants could catch the main theme of the workshop and that they enjoyed the whole day along with CUTS. Some of them had praised CUTS for the way people were made to interact with each other and even requested to organize such workshops in the future where they will be participating.

7. Concluding Remarks

AG sounded the closing bell by thanking the participants their valued presence and requested them to take forward this effort by organizing such workshops in their respective districts involving even more number participants.
