

Chapter 10

DECENTRALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA: TRENDS AND ISSUES

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, decentralization has become a global trend and it is on the political agenda in many countries. Education is being decentralized in numerous countries as part of a larger move to reform public management systems (Govinda, 2003a). The policies largely aim to reduce government size, reorganize delivery, expand private initiatives, and create new partnerships. Decentralization is having a significant impact on policy, planning, and management of elementary education. With the increasing impact of globalization, the challenges faced by the nations of the world are substantial; hence, the importance of localization through decentralization has intensified. At the same time, decentralization is seen as a means of improving the efficiency of education systems and the quality of educational services. In India, education is the joint responsibility of state and union governments. Ever since decentralization has been promoted in the field of education, different states in India have undergone various decentralization processes with distinct outcomes. The actual manifestation of the process of decentralization, in terms of the rationale put forth as well as operational features adopted, varies widely across the states. The socio-political context and the degree of popular participation in the decision-making process directly influence the outcomes of decentralization measures.

Generally speaking, in India decentralization is treated as a means of politically restructuring the system. Capacity building is also held up as one of the benefits of effective implementation. However, the decision to decentralize often translates into intense social activity at the local level. Many researchers suggest that educational decentralization essentially becomes a political decision that requires strong political will, both at the central and state levels. It also becomes imperative to carefully plan the process of decentralization to ensure effective implementation. The challenge of balancing several different aims can be enormous: first, making education more relevant to local needs; second, democratically promoting people's participation by empowering local authorities; and third, improving performance accountability (Govinda, 2003a). In general, it appears that, decentralization seems to mean different things to different people, depending on the political and administrative context in which the term is used. The concept has remained vague and highly ambiguous, when used by policy makers as well as intellectuals. Public discussion of decentralization is often confusing, characterized by sweeping, cross-disciplinary claims about the positive effects of decentralization measures on the quality and efficiency of both government and social interaction (Faguet, 2001). It is within this ambiguously defined

framework of decentralization that one has to carefully study the actions initiated in the education sector to transfer power and authority to local level actors. Needless to say, over the 50 years of post-independent period, contours of decentralization in education have also undergone significant transformations.

This chapter examines how decentralization is being integrated into the system of educational governance in India. The focus is on primary education, where decentralized management is perceived as the only means for achieving efficient management. The chapter begins with a description of policy initiatives that have been introduced for democratic as well as administrative decentralization in India, and describes how they have affected primary education. We also consider whether India is favoring a market oriented efficiency model or is emphasizing political and ideological reform. Finally, the chapter addresses some of the issues that inform contemporary debates and discourses on the subject in India, and across the world as well.

2. DECENTRALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE: CHANGING FACETS

2.1. *The Early Years After Independence*

Decentralization of educational governance has been a prominent element of educational discourse in recent years. In India, however, debates and policy initiatives related to decentralization emerged immediately after the country was liberated from British colonial control. At that time, a federal arrangement was relied on to bring together the various politico-administrative units with diverse culture, language, and ethnic affiliations. However, the notion that federating units should enjoy some freedom and autonomy was also ingrained in the concept of the nation. Accordingly, primary responsibility for several areas of policy and action, including governance of education, was delegated to the state governments.

It is in this context that the concepts of *panchayati raj* and a community development framework were adopted in the early years after independence. The political system consisted of three tiers: district, block (sub-district), and village levels. While political decentralization followed this framework, it was deemed appropriate to designate the block level as the main unit for development administration. Thus came the establishment of the Block Development Offices, with each block consisting of 100–150 villages. The districts created during the British period remained more or less intact. Interestingly, education governance remained generally delinked from the development administration framework adopted for all other sectors. The district education offices remained the main organ for school governance. Nearly 25 years after this arrangement was established, separate offices of education were created at the block level in many states. This was partially due to the enormous expansion of the primary education system that took place during the preceding two decades. In fact, the block education offices currently oversee primary education in many states, while the district education office directly governs secondary education.

After an initial flurry of interest in “democratic decentralization,” attention to the process waned. Most of the states showed little interest in involving local citizens in the management of public institutions. At the village level, the relative inexperience of the people, lack of knowledge, dearth of resources, and tightening of bureaucratic

controls rendered panchayat samitis and *zilla parishads* ineffective (Dhar, 1997). Reflecting on this issue, Myrdal writes,

Another hope inspired and initiated from the centre is that a system of locally elected bodies, the panchayati raj, better known under the label “democratic decentralization” or “democratic planning,” will encourage the masses to participate in the management of local affairs and thereby weaken the power of the local political bosses . . . the most conspicuous immediate effect of such efforts has been to strengthen the grip of the rural elite, the self-elected boss class, over the masses. Whenever locally elected bodies are given powers worth scrambling for, they are almost invariably run in the interests of the dominant caste in land and wealth. The system of panchayati raj, like the basic democracies in Pakistan, has not, in general, thrown up any new leadership in rural areas.

(Myrdal, 1968, p. 299)

Correspondingly, educational decentralization rarely secured a place on the political agenda in most states in India.

2.2. *The Recentralization Phase*

The Education Commission of 1964–1966 reiterated the national government’s commitment to decentralization through its endorsement of the National Policy on Education, which was adopted in 1968. But at the state level, interest in decentralization waned during the 1970s. In fact, a counter-movement began to take shape. The most significant example of this shift was the large-scale nationalization of schools, particularly at the primary level of education. As a result, state governments became the main providers and managers of elementary education throughout the country. This paved the way for the deconcentration of power, although considerable authority (especially in terms of the recruitment, posting, and transfer of personnel) continued to be vested at the district level.

Interestingly, as deconcentration was being promoted at the district level, decision-making became more centralized at the state level. This led to the erosion of authority at the district level. The state secretariats, which within in the original framework dealt only with policy matters, assumed greater responsibility for running the education system. This was especially true in terms of teacher appointments and the creation of new schools. In fact, by the early 1970s, few state governments were willing to take up the task of political decentralization through panchayati raj elections and the transfer of power to decentralized units at district and sub-district levels. This disinterest on the part of state-level leadership paralleled broader trends in the larger sphere concerning political reform and public administration.

2.3. *Revival of Interest in the 1980s*

The 1980s saw a revival of interest in panchayati raj in some of the states. For example, in Karnataka local elections and the distribution of block grants provided local bodies with increased autonomy. This prompted many local bodies to allocate

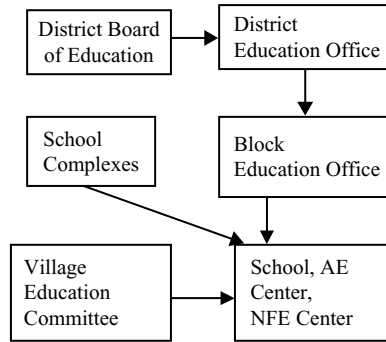


Figure 10.1: NPE—1986 Proposal.

funds for education development activities at the district and sub-district levels. Of course, some of the decisions were reversed when the state-level political leadership changed. Such developments highlight the vulnerability of such measures to political vicissitudes.

Interestingly, Andhra Pradesh moved away from the national pattern of a three-tier local governance system; instead the state adopted a two-tier system, by and large following the recommendations of the Asoka Mehta Committee (Mehta, 1978). However, unlike the Karnataka system, the reforms in Andhra Pradesh did not include any major move to decentralize governance of education. West Bengal also took up the task of strengthening the three-tier system for local governance. Meanwhile, the western Indian states of Gujarat and Maharashtra had decentralized educational management at the district levels, though minimal progress could be observed with regard to decentralization of authority to sub-district levels.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 was a landmark measure, as it not only encouraged decentralization but also articulated a concrete implementation plan. Interestingly, the NPE recommendations essentially entailed a process of deconcentration (see Figure 10.1). The policy did not include any plans for devolving power to local self-government bodies, instead focusing on decongesting upper level education offices and creating district boards of education. Though many states initially showed enthusiasm for the NPE recommendations, very little reform of educational governance actually occurred.

2.4. Reemergence of Decentralization and Panchayati Raj in the 1990s

During the 1990s India made significant moves toward decentralization, both in terms of policy reorientation and practical actions in the field. Corresponding to the efforts in reforming public administration, fairly vigorous attention was paid to the problem of management and control of education and the need to involve communities in the oversight of schools. At the policy level, the somewhat aborted attempt of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI's) during the early period after independence was revived through the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution in 1992. These amendments mandated the establishment of local bodies at the village, block,

district, and municipal levels, through democratic elections. This is arguably the most significant policy initiative for decentralized governance that India has formulated since independence. The mandatory reservation of one third of the elected posts for women, in particular, was a major step in the direction of creating a gender balance in the country's governance system.

2.5. *Innovative Efforts for Decentralization*

In recent years, the national as well as state governments have promoted experimentation with various approaches to decentralizing the primary education system. In many cases, these innovations have paved the way for the implementation of decentralized management frameworks. They have encouraged the delegation of power to schools, lower level government offices, and elected bodies, thus providing opportunities for local citizens to participate in the management of schools. Different states in the country have relied on different reform strategies. Many have followed a technical administration approach, which promotes top down transformation through change of rules and regulations (with or without corresponding legislation); stakeholders at various levels of the hierarchy are expected to adopt new roles and functions. Other states have employed a socio-political approach, which involves building institutional structures from below through direct and active participation of people at the grassroots level. Most of the states have followed the former approach, although it is possible to find examples of the latter method; the most ambitious example of this approach is the massive project initiated by government of India under the banner of District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) (Govinda, 2003b).¹

2.6. *District Planning Under DPEP—A Case of Controlled Decentralization*

In an expanding education system, decisions about planning and investment can generate debate and controversy. Opening new schools, making decisions about financial allocations, teacher appointments, and other related matters invariably become areas of contention. In a large country with a number of federated units, decisions tied to the flow of finances between the central and state governments, on the one hand, and between state governments and lower level governance structures, on the other, may take on further significance.

One such initiative that provoked heated debate in India during the 1990s was the District Primary Education Project (DPEP). This project attempted to put in place a new framework for managing primary education at the district level. The framework granted considerable autonomy to local stakeholders and sought to actively involve members of the community in decisions about schools. The DPEP framework, however, raised critical questions about the long-term sustenance of decentralized decision-making in the Indian context. The plan for granting autonomy to the district level was not altogether new. Similar bodies, such as the Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA), had been created in other sectors. However, in that case, the management body established at the district level was not fully incorporated in to the administrative bureaucracy. For this reason, some analysts viewed the SFDA project as an example of “controlled decentralization” (Mathur, 1985).

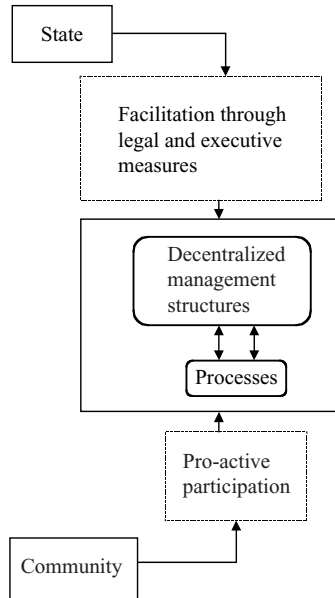


Figure 10.2: Model of Convergent Legitimization. Source: Govinda (2003a,b).

As an initiative sponsored by India's central government, the DPEP maintains an identity distinct from the general education administrative structure. This situation raises the question, "Can a management structure promoted by the state really bring about system-wide transformation of educational management?" (Govinda & Varghese, 1994) Some observers have expressed doubts about the functional utility of adopting the district as the unit of planning, given the large size of most districts in India (which average of more than 2,000 primary schools). Experience indicates that institutional structures created through executive orders from the state, such as village education committees and school complexes, have not taken root. Convergence between state officials and local stakeholders appears to be a necessary condition for such reforms to succeed (see Figure 10.2).

3. SOME QUESTIONS ON THE RATIONALE FOR DECENTRALIZATION

In the early years after gaining independence from colonial control, Indian leadership initiated reforms with an ideology driven agenda of giving power to the people by creating local self-governments through democratic elections. Empowering the people through democratic institutions was seen as a value in itself. While, panchayati raj and community development gave the operational framework for decentralization, the contours of the subject of discourse were largely defined by the liberation rhetoric that characterized most countries in the immediate aftermath of freedom from external rule. Thus, "power to the people" at the grassroots formed the core rationale for decentralization in India. In the report of Education Commission (1964–1966), decentralization of educational governance was recommended with the goal

of ensuring deeper involvement of community in school education. It was envisaged that, "At the primary stage, it is required to organize program to bring the school closer to the community with an accent on serving the community in suitable ways" (NCERT, 1972, p. 12). It was further argued that, "School education is predominantly a local-state partnership and higher education is a Center-State partnership. It is this basic principle that should guide the evolution of delicate balance between centralization and decentralization which our planning needs" (Government of India, 1972, p. 667).

The rationale for decentralization seems to have gradually changed over the years. The National Policy on Education 1986 and the accompanying Program of Action called for an integrated and decentralized approach to developing school education systems with a focus on building the capacity of districts in planning and management of school education, particularly at elementary level. Decentralization has been regarded as a fundamental requirement for improving the entire education system and creating an appropriate framework for accountability at each level of administration. However, when the issue was revisited in the 1990s, a decade characterized by the government's eagerness to introduce market reforms, the emphasis appeared to have changed dramatically. The language used in articulating the rationale for decentralization underwent significant transformation. Phrases such as "empowering the people" or "grassroots level democracy" almost disappeared from the discourse. For instance, the Moily Committee set up by the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), argued that:

It is increasingly becoming evident that the bureaucratic systems are not able to manage the challenges in the field of educational development and people's participation is seen the world over as an essential pre-requisite for achieving the goal of education for all. It is in this context that the Committee perceives the entrustment of educational programmes to institutions of local self-government as a step in the right direction.

(MOHRD, 1995, p. 14)

The move to decentralize appears to have been motivated by the utilitarian value of involving the community, which could possibly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the school system.

India may not be alone in changing the contents of the discourse on decentralization. In fact, in line with increased open market reforms, a predominant view is emerging at the international level that centralized state control is responsible for the poor state of affairs and it is essential to bring in decentralization and local community participation to improve the situation. This view is often promoted, at least implicitly, by the conditionalities placed by international agencies involved in educational development. According to Maclure, three arguments underscore this line of thinking: (a) since central governments are increasingly unable to direct and administer all aspects of mass education, decentralization of planning and programming will result in improved service delivery by enabling local authorities to perform tasks they are better equipped; (b) since mass education has placed an inordinate strain on state resources, decentralization will improve economies of scale and will lead to more appropriate responsiveness to the particular needs and situations of different regions

and groups; and (c) by engaging active involvement of community and private sector groups in local schooling, decentralization will generate more representativeness and equity in educational decision-making, and thus foster greater local commitment to public education (Maclure, 1993).

It may seem unimportant to read too much into this transformation in the language or the increased emphasis on utilitarianism in reforming educational governance. Yet, it raises some critical questions in the Indian context: Are we moving from a fundamental commitment for empowering the community for self-determination to a limited rationale of technical and economic efficiency? Is it a fundamental value to be internalized or just a technocratic means of solving some of the management problems? Is a particular meaning and rationale of decentralization getting universalized?

4. UNRESOLVED DILEMMAS AND EMERGING ISSUES

The process of transforming the educational governance system that got moving after the 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution is undoubtedly much wider in coverage and more consistently pursued as compared to what happened in the early years after independence. However, the situation is still in a flux in most states. Further, though most of the states have opted to employ a technical administrative transformation of the system through top down measures, as the reforms unfold and take shape, the process is not likely to remain a technical one. The nature and degree of power transferred within such a reform process are dependent upon political will and the power struggles that underlie all efforts to achieve decentralization (Adamolekun et al., 1990). What pattern of power sharing arrangement between the central and peripheral actors will prevail in the final analysis is difficult to predict at this stage. This will depend on the socio-cultural characteristics as well as historical and geographical background factors separate from the emerging political dynamics. In fact, leadership at the national as well state levels are confronted with a number of difficult issues and dilemmas, which have to be tackled if a stable system of decentralized governance in the education sector is to emerge. Some of these critical ones are discussed in the following section.

4.1. *Desirability of Exclusive Dependence on Politics of Panchayati Raj Bodies*

Though there is a broad move toward empowering the local bodies for governing school education, not all state governments have moved decisively in this direction. There is obviously no consensus concerning the issue of whether such a move would have a significantly positive impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the education system, which has been the main motive for decentralization in recent years. It is argued that, in political systems with empowered local self-government bodies, political upheavals at the national and provincial/state levels echo at the grassroots level. In such circumstances, the devolution of power to elected representatives can threaten stability of organizational arrangements in the field and thereby strengthen the hands of the bureaucracy, instead of giving more power to the community. It is also argued that that elected local bodies are susceptible to political upheaval and intra-party power dynamics and may therefore lead to parochial considerations in

decision-making. The basic question raised is whether education receives due attention under these bodies—or will it only result in decentralizing existing problems of the system? While elected local bodies have the legitimacy in democratic representational sense, the issues raised above cannot be ignored. In fact, in many countries, school governing boards are created through independent election processes distinct from the local self-government bodies created for public administration.

A hidden tension underlying these debates on devolution to local bodies is that of “who will decide at the local level—the political leader or the bureaucrat.” In a centralized system, the bureaucracy tends to have an upper hand, notwithstanding the complaints of political interference in decision-making. With decentralization, whenever local bodies are created with delegated or devolved powers, this is likely to call into question the well-established authority of the local education office of administration, often leading to unresolved tensions. The issue requires careful consideration.

When a multilevel hierarchical system has several tiers of offices, from the center to the school, which is the case in all the states of India, the situation becomes even more complex. Each level is eager to assume authority for decision-making but to pass on the responsibility for implementation to others. Again, it is impossible to make any a priori assessment of the number of layers that would make the system more efficient as in the final analysis it is the rational distribution of functional areas and the internal efficiency of each layer that determine the overall system efficiency (Govinda, 1997). A contentious issue facing most state governments in this regard is that of teacher recruitment and posting. In general, teacher unions have been quite apprehensive of the move to establish local governance systems. Consequently, considering the high political stakes involved, most of the state governments continue to treat teachers as state employees, even though they serve under local bodies.

However, there is a distinct trend to transfer the power to appoint personnel to local units, as in case of Madhya Pradesh, but this move is also accompanied by delegation of the responsibility to find finances (at least partially). The reservations among the teachers need careful consideration. It is necessary to create proper service rules so that the local bodies do not create increased labor litigation and political chaos. Giving freedom for the local units to recruit teachers can have far-reaching implications for the quality of the teaching if unchecked in terms of the norms of educational and training qualifications and the salary structure of the teachers. The issue of who controls such critical functions cannot be taken lightly. If unresolved amicably with the involvement of all stakeholders, it may prove counter-productive to the decentralization process. As Weiler points out, the imperative of control is likely to outweigh the state’s need for legitimacy. Consequently, decentralization and participation become political ploys, useful symbolically for purposes of discussion, but entailing minimal political cost, as little is done in the form of implementation (Weiler, 1983).

4.2. Community Empowerment and Civil Society Participation

The democracy rationale for decentralization is built on the core premise that people have the right to decide for themselves and therefore their participation is

critical for decentralization measures to succeed. Even if the motive is utilitarian, involvement of the community members is seen as a basic prerequisite to instill a sense of ownership and thereby improve the efficiency of the system. Is this evident from the Indian experience? More specifically, have decentralization measures really ensured community empowerment and civil society participation? What model of decentralization is most likely to promote community participation? Will transfer of education governance to local bodies really usher more effective community involvement in decision-making?

Evidence from different states is mixed. At the formal level, most of the states have initiated concrete measures to bring the school and the community closer. Strengthening of parent teacher associations in Kerala and creation of empowered village education committees and school management committees in several other states are a clear illustration of this move. It is generally argued that what neighbors who know one another can do relatively easily would be very difficult to do from a distance through a centralized bureaucracy. In particular, democratic decentralization that utilizes local information, initiative, and ingenuity is extremely important for the poor and the excluded. Changing the political culture in the village gives more voice to the poor and induces them to get involved in local self-governing institutions and management of the local commons—this makes the poor themselves stakeholders in the system, so that they take an interest in a system they were formerly excluded from (Bardhan, 2001).

However, not everyone is convinced that devolution of education governance functions to local bodies will ensure the participation of local community members, particularly the marginalized. For instance, reflecting on the developments in West Bengal, Webster comments that decentralization does not always result in the empowerment of the people and reduction in state control:

Far from it, the extension of the state outward and downwards can just as well serve the objective of consolidating the power of the central state as it can serve the objective of devolving power away from the centre. It can extend the state's control over the people just as it can aid the people's control over the state and its activities. Decentralization is very much a double-edged sword.

(Webster, 1992, pp. 129–130)

It is obvious that decentralization becoming a genuine means of community participation requires much deeper changes in the mind set of the people—those who govern as well as those who are governed—than simply creating local units and transferring some powers to them.

There is also considerable naivety accompanying policy pronouncements associated with community participation in education. It should be recognized that communities in a village or a small geographical unit carry multiple identities—depending on the stake they have. Accordingly, they become active members of different groups and serve community interests. Can we assume that education decision-making is such an area of activity that it cuts across interests of the whole village or the city? It is found that sometimes they serve the interests of only the “narrowly defined groups” they belong to jeopardizing the interests of many children. Generally, community participation is best served when people join hands on a voluntary basis.

But will there be provision for such voluntary associations in the framework of decentralization?

Kantha and Narain, in analyzing the situation in Bihar, consider that the idea of a community is based on a sense of identity, which implies also a difference:

Pre-modern communities or primary communities have set social forms, very intense, by which people are classified as similar or different. More importantly these are communities which are not formed on account of the 'convergence of interest' which underscores the identity of the other form of community. In contemporary discourse the interest bonded communities are those that are being structured and encouraged to participate in the development process. However because the bonds are weak and uncertain, the picture of the primary community is sought to be evoked so as to bring up the imagery of the traditional community. Because of the newness of its form the pretension involves taking these to be immemorial ancient communities. The earlier communities do not have a territorial identity; these are for example religious or caste communities. Larger collectives are now being constructed by creating linkages of common interest, which could be health or education in which the concept of the village as a community, which while fixing it with a territorial identity, is created above the traditional identities of communities that are existing in village and that transcend territorial boundaries (for example linkages with castes or religious groups residing in other villages). Somewhere along the line, intrinsic to the concept in the formation of the interest-based community is the concept of community advantage, in participation and of individual advantage. So long as this advantage, is apparent, the cohesiveness remains, but has to be continuously perceived.

(Kantha & Narain, forthcoming)

The central question to be addressed in the context of the highly stratified Indian rural society is, "Will education development programs in general and primary schools in particular bring together rural populace on a common platform?" What has been pointed out regarding the Bihar setting needs careful examination in the context of decentralization as a whole.

A related issue regards the extent to which decentralization facilitates the involvement of non-governmental organizations. As of now there is no model of local governance that can best facilitate the involvement of non-governmental organizations in decision-making. However, some Education for All projects, such as *lok jumbish* in Rajasthan and the Bihar Education Project, have created meaningful strategies for involving NGOs in a number of areas of implementing education development programs in a participatory framework. Making matters worse, civil society in India, as anywhere else, is also often somewhat disorganized and conflict ridden. And civil society organizations are less than fully accountable to their members and to the people whom they claim to serve (Crook & Manor, 2000). The crucial question is about the appropriate balance between centralized control and decentralized decision-making;

that is, “What is the optimum balance for a nation-state between state control and citizen participation?”

4.3. *Capacity Building for Decision-Making at the Local Level*

Changed institutional arrangements and empowered local bodies naturally usher new actors into various positions and demand new knowledge and skill orientation from the incumbents. Traditionally, such requirements have been highlighted for local level actors. In fact, capacity building for local governance has attracted tremendous attention from all quarters in recent years. It is not unusual to find top-level leaders arguing for withholding powers from local functionaries on the pretext that they do not possess the capacity required. A pertinent question very rarely raised in this context is: “Who needs capacity building for local governance?”

Traditional strategies and programs for capacity building focus almost exclusively on launching training programs, especially for community leaders and grassroots level functionaries. It is necessary to look beyond this narrow framework. Involvement of the local community in educational governance demands a radical transformation of the organizational culture of the public education management system as a whole. Greater involvement of the local community requires that the higher authorities agree to give up certain powers hitherto enjoyed. Also, school control by local stakeholders brings greater pressure on the school authorities to promote transparency and shared perspective with parents. The school authorities cannot merely meet the demands of remotely placed of higher authorities and get away even with low efficiency in school functioning. Accountability to local masters is not something many school authorities are familiar with.

A related issue is the institutional arrangement for capacity building. It is important to recognize that capacity building is not just a one-time activity. It is essential to make more stable arrangements for orienting new as well as old occupants of decision-making positions on a continuous manner. However, evidence from the field shows that the education departments in most states are not equipped to deal with the situation. In fact, most of the efforts in recent years have taken place under special education development projects that are time bound. How do we sustain the capacity building activities beyond such projects? Further, the task has invariably been seen as delivering standard training packages. Such an approach is not likely to suffice. Developing new habits of self-determination among all concerned is a slow process and requires adequate provisions for direct practice with technical support and professional guidance. Capacity building should, therefore, be viewed as a comprehensive process of facilitating the change over from centralized management to a system of local governance.

A final issue to be addressed is: “Should Practice of Local governance wait for Capacity Building?” It is ironic that the argument for decentralization often begins by highlighting how it would help bring more people into the fold of education and thereby improve the overall educational status of the community. However, when actual empowerment of the local community is to happen, the very same argument is turned around, as low education development among the local population is pointed out as the main obstacle for decentralization. The real challenge is how to break this vicious cycle. It is true that the field level personnel in many countries seriously

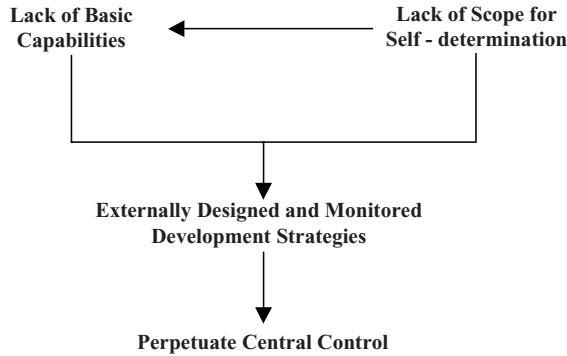


Figure 10.3: Vicious Cycle Leading to Central Control

lack planning and management capabilities. But it is difficult to decide whether refusal to change the governance framework is fully explained by the apparent lack of management capacity in the field level. How could they acquire capabilities if they have no opportunity to practice them? It is important to recognize that decentralization represents a way of living not just a technical strategy (see Figure 10.3; Govinda, 2001).

Are we making too much of the need for capacity building for self-governance? Is the real problem one of lack of technical capacity or the absence of adequate financial resources? A closer examination of past experiences on what is really debilitating the functioning of local self-governments in India reveals that the lack of attention paid to the problem of resources has significantly jeopardized even the learning process for the local leadership and community to acquire the skills of self-management and decision-making. Thus, without a serious debate on resource provisioning, it sounds hollow to go ahead and transfer powers and responsibilities to the local bodies with respect to educational governance. In fact, such a move may result in increased control of the education sector by market forces and, in turn, even more seriously affect equity and create a backlash of demand from the poor to recentralize.

4.4. *Financing Local Governance of Education*

Transforming the pattern of governance from a top down centralized framework to one that is decentralized, empowering local actors for decision-making, demands a new approach for financing the education system. Where will the funds come from in the new system? How will the existing flow of funds be channelized for implementing locally made decisions? As most of the state governments in the country are undergoing severe financial constraints, the governments have been compelled to explore alternative avenues for financing education programs. Some view decentralization as a means of mobilizing additional resources from the community and economizing state-level investments. Such efforts have come in for severe criticism from a number of quarters, particularly as they would lead to further inequity in education access and quality. This becomes doubly complicated, as the education system will continue to expand with more and more children joining the schools. Recognizing

the likely emergence of such issues and the ensuing tensions at the state level, recent constitutional amendments recommended setting up a State Finance Commission under Article 243-I to review the financial position of the panchayats. It has been authorized to determine the taxes, duties, tolls, and fees leviable by the state, and to make recommendations to the governor of the state regarding the distribution of funds (Article 243-I, 73rd Amendment Act, 1992).

Several state governments have acted upon this recommendation and set up state-level finance commissions for determining the framework for allocation of finances to different districts. States have also initiated actions to raise resources through alternate sources to finance education at decentralized levels. For instance, in Maharashtra, a District Fund managed by district authorities has been created; also, the village education committees have been given specified amounts of annual grants, which can be utilized by the committee for developmental purposes. The situation is not only still fluid but also raises serious concerns in many states:

Earmarked funds and locally-raised resources which, in the economic situation of many rural areas would be difficult to find, would not provide to the local bodies enough funds to deal with expansion and quality improvement of elementary education. The financial constraints, as the history of local body institutions has shown for years, will adversely affect their ability to manage elementary education, much less enhance its quality. There is need for a system of differential grants which take care of the economic capacity of different villages and localities.

(Dhar, 1997, p. 113)

Innovative experiments, such as the *Shikshak Samakhya* (Teacher Empowerment) program in Madhya Pradesh and the proposal to provide specified amount of untied funds to each primary school under the District Primary Education Program, represent moves to inject a new sense of freedom and financial autonomy into individual schools. A similar move to allocate specified sums of money to all schools is being envisaged in Karnataka, to be utilized through the newly constituted School Development and Monitoring Committees. But will such short-term efforts, often based on availability of funds through time bound projects, be sustainable? In this context it is worthwhile to take note of experiences from other parts of the world. Where resources are especially constrained, the risk of failing to fulfill some particular function may easily neutralize the potential gains from fulfilling it more efficiently and effectively with a new approach. The arguments also rest on the assumption that local cadre will be independent enough and motivated enough to take responsibility for risky undertakings. It could also be argued that small, relatively weak organizations will more likely be swamped by the need to respond to unexpected problems. It may also be that, even if decentralized units are better able to generate innovations, the institutionalization, diffusion and adaptation of successful innovations requires the resources and capabilities of the center (Cohen et al., 1981).

Many critics fear that under the pretext of decentralization, the state governments will abandon even the current minimal levels of financial commitment and begin to

expect community members to pay for the services provided. In other words, decentralization may raise the specter of privatization on large-scale further aggravating inequities in the society:

The idea of decentralization is attractive; However it can also be a less than overt step on the way to increased privatization, deregulation and a rolling-back of many of the economic and particularly social functions of the state The term 'decentralization' can be articulated into a monetarist discourse, but alternatively it can be linked into a discourse that combines ideas of collective empowerment, democracy and socialism.

(Slater, 1989, p. 516)

This is a matter that needs closer examination in India. Until recently, private schooling, which is expensive, could be found expanding only in urban localities. But now this trend is observed in rural areas as well. Private financing of education can be considered a positive move to relieve pressure on the governments. However, if this trend is allowed to grow unchecked, and if the government reduces its investment in education proportionately, it will seriously affect the interests of the poor. Many question whether some of the state governments are taking these means of privatization and community financing as escape routes from the commitment of providing free and compulsory education.

5. CONCLUSION

India has undoubtedly witnessed a wide range of reforms leading to decentralization of educational governance during the last 10–15 years. Amendments to the Constitution made during the beginning of 1990s gave further fillip to the move. However, it should be realized that the situation has become politically much more complicated than it was five decades ago and one has therefore to reckon with unevenness across the country both in terms of the extent of reform and its nature.

A closer review of the discourse on educational decentralization shows an element of inadequacy in the analysis, both with respect to policy and practice. It appears that the top down reforms being initiated essentially through the bureaucratic machinery treat the task only as a technical administrative one. It is necessary to realize that all decentralization measures are located in specific social and cultural contexts and in the final analysis one seeks to transform the norms of social transaction. Particularly, transformation of micro-level power equations, which is at the core of local governance reform, is highly contingent upon caste, linguistic, and communal considerations. It is necessary to begin with a realistic understanding of the community characteristics in the country. This is essential because, "ideologies of educational decentralization frequently assume a dichotomy between a socially organic local community and the nation state and the local community tends to be defined in ideal terms corresponding, for instance, to an Athenian conception of participatory democracy" (Lauglo & McClean, 1985, p. 3).

Such assumptions may lead to highly dangerous decisions on management responsibilities. As Dhar emphasizes this point in the Indian context,

The contention that rural communities are composite and cohesive is not valid. Studies of villages have indicated group formations, not only on the basis of economic and political interests, but more often, on the basis of caste, religion and ethnic composition. One should therefore not approach panchayat raj institutions from a romantic view of communities, but from the point of view of endemic and continuous conflicts of group and individual interests and constant shifting of alignments and loyalties. Educational policy makers and administrators are generally ill-equipped to live and deal with a situation of conflict.

(Dhar, 1997, pp. 113–114)

Apart from addressing this sociological complexity, unionization of teachers and other stakeholders also needs more careful consideration. Unilaterally passing legislation and imposing new rules and regulations by the government unilaterally will not suffice. Careful analysis in a disaggregated manner, with sensitivity to local contexts and formulation of innovative and accommodative policies and programs, is necessary.

The typical reform approach dealing with sharing of responsibilities between the state government and the panchayati raj bodies does not seem to take into cognizance developments in the larger social and economic scene. Having embraced an open market economy in recent years, the country cannot ignore the market forces in the education sector. Fast growing private self-financing sector in education illustrates this point well. With the emergence of the market, not just the state and the civil society, as a powerful arbiter for provision of education, questions of equity and quality have been further compounded. Policy makers have to recognize the downstream and intergenerational costs of seriously unequal learning opportunities, which are likely to emerge with unchecked marketization of the education sector. Markets do not solve fairness problems. These problems are the natural responsibility of the public sector and have to be integrated into public education debate and policy (World Bank, 2000).

As reiterated by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, improvement of education requires policy makers to face up squarely to their responsibilities. They cannot leave it to market forces or to some kind of self-regulation to put things right when they go wrong (Delors, 1996). Therefore, governance reform frameworks have to treat the issue in a triangular fashion, as between the state, the community (represented by the local governance system) and the market. Such an approach cannot be done in a top down bureaucratic fashion. There are no standard solutions to the questions involved. It is highly contextual to each state demanding continuous dialogue with stakeholders and a careful rearticulating of the policies and programs in an evolutionary perspective.

Finally, it should be noted that though a utilitarian rationale for decentralization appears to fit the current developmental scene, one cannot anchor governance reforms on such fleeting phenomena. In order to sustainable and internally consistent, they have to be based on the long-term goal of empowering the people for

self-determination. Education has a critical role to play in this process, both as a subject of reform and, more importantly, as a promoter of the reform process in the larger socio-political relational dynamics. But such transformations cannot be achieved through short-term project initiatives or with foolproof blue prints, however strong the capacity building efforts are. If establishing a democratic life style in educational governance is the final goal, people learn through practice and experience; training alone will not do. Mistakes are a part of the learning process and one cannot have a perfect launch and implementation of decentralization.

NOTE

1. For detailed discussion on different approaches to decentralization, also see Govinda, R. and Madhumita Bandyopadhyay, "Approaches to Decentralised Management of Basic Education in India," in a forthcoming publication of IRMA, India.

6. REFERENCES

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