

Foreword

It is now a well-accepted fact that decentralised governance provides greater development opportunities and flexibility in administration. It also ensures transparent system of administration reducing transaction costs. But at the same time it raises many challenges in terms of meeting the demand for services in the rural areas. One need not undertake any big analysis to understand the inadequacies of services in rural India and the non-affordability of the cost of providing such services. Therefore, the real challenge to decentralisation is a double-edged sword. On one side, the decentralised governance needs to garner administrative skills and good governance practices to provide quality services that include electricity, water, roads, sanitation, education, and other services, whereas, on the other side, the resources trickling from the top layers of governance are significantly inadequate to meet the demand of providing these public goods as expected.

Among the services, water has always been treated as public good and charging for water services is not only difficult but an irksome political challenge. The study conducted by Prof D Rajasekhar and Ms R Manjula on Gram Panchayats in Karnataka, specifically looking into the affordability of drinking water supply in the Panchayat system, begins with the goal of self-sufficiency at Gram Panchayat levels in providing water services and ends up in showing how difficult it is. The issue is intricate and calls for an in-depth analysis at the Panchayat level both from the point of view of stakeholders at the bottom as well as administrators from the top.

After analysing the entire financial portfolio of the Gram Panchayats spread over the districts of Karnataka, the authors have brought out important issues in terms of financial feasibility of providing various services. Their focus in this monograph is on providing water and other services. The authors conclude that the State should enable lower-level PRIs to decide their house tax on an equity basis and even allow them to conduct revisions in the tax structure as and when required. Theoretically, the authors advocate the users' paying for the services or some part of the cost of providing services. There are, of course, different views on this proposition and that may provoke a good debate. I am sure that the work of the authors will play a significant role in such debates and provide a good policy platform for the administrators.

The monograph is also quite rich in its research contents that throw open many hypotheses for the future researches.

I am sure that it will serve the purpose of raising many issues, both in policy and in research.

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