Report on Webinar

Rethinking the Role of Local Governments in a Post Covid 19 World

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In the five-day (10 to14 December, 2020) international webinar on *Rethinking the Role of Local Governments in a Post Covid 19 World*, 65 papers were presented on a vast variety of subjects. Scientists, scholars and academicians were invited from north-east province to the western state of Rajasthan, from northern most union territory of Kashmir to the southern state of Kerala in India and from Japan to USA and Mexico. There were 18 scholars from abroad. The organizers (Cenrtre for Gandhian Studies, Central University of Kerala, Kasargod, Kerala and Centre for Rural Management (CRM), Kottayam, Kerala) allocated various tasks to younger generation and women. It makes this webinar a truly global and inclusive of gender, age and nationality. Some pertinent points discussed during five days of deliberation are presented here.

General consensus was evident that local governments across the world have played a pivotal role in mitigating the spread of Covid -19. Decentralization is better suited to deal with the pandemic than centralization was highlighted in almost all papers presented. It also became clear that decentralized political and economic systems have helped to reduce inequality and conflict between central and local governments and between various social classes.

During this webinar actions taken by different governments around the globe were compared in context to dealing with the pandemic. Some heads of the countries made delayed decision in imposing measures advised by the scientists, for example the UK, while Ghana's early border closure and lockdown has helped the country in reducing the death toll. However, both the countries had a common consequence. It came to their attention that the important role of local governments in their respective countries were seriously neglected.

Rethinking of the role of local governments was not just in the context of dealing with Covid -19 crisis, it is about defining the role of local governments in any endemic, epidemic and/or pandemic situation. The delegates talked about the importance of local government's role and increasing its profile. The governments of some countries declared this situation as a 'disaster', which means an emergency. Emergency is a war like situation which needs coordinated efforts of uniformed and non-uniformed forces. They need to operate jointly. That means a need for a single point of command - command and control is a centralized system. In order to overcome the disastrous situation, the regional and local governments do not bargain with the centre, they except the rules, of course not as reform but as a reaction to extreme sudden crisis.

It is best to bear this in mind that no government could foresee or predict such a crisis and therefore could not prepare to tackle it, but the fact is, developing countries have suffered the most. Majority of people in India live in hinterland. Vast number of Indian population face vulnerability due to marginalization, discrimination, institutional structures and poverty. These are the hurdles in fighting this virus. It is understood that social, economic and health equity needs to be addressed. But absence of infrastructure, lack of education and poor health facilities will pose problem in vaccinating village population. To roll out the vaccination programme micro level research needs to be taken up. The local governments can map resources, channelize and use human resources; and then a crisis such as this can be tackled. It has been realized that Disaster management authorities are needed not only at the national, state and district level but also at the city level & ward level. The Covid crisis challenges us to think boldly on an alternative path of development which is more

sustainable, gender just, democratic and is based on the principle of self-governance at the grassroots level.

'Decentralized system' is the buzz word and the most discussed topic since the spread of Covid -19. It has succeeded in some parts of the world and failed in others. Decentralization process began in the Latin American continent in the 1980s. Since then, territorial and urban planning, economic and social development and citizen participation are happening at a slower pace. We can argue that Kerala's initial success in containment testified to the importance of democratic decentralization and thus framed popular action (Chathukulam & Tharamangalam, 2021). But in contrast, countries like China, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam have been successful in fighting Covid-19 with effective centralization.

So, a question can be posed, Is decentralization in all areas good or without problems? Decentralization with privatization can be proved devastating which is experienced in higher number of deaths is privately run care homes in Sweden. It can also be affected by right wing populism and can prove lethal for national and international peace. We have to be aware that fragmented public administration in decentralised system can put democracy in jeopardy. Therefore, rethinking of the role of local governments is required. Decentralization at the village level is considered to be the ideal situation, but some examples of its misuse are also found. The caste disparities and caste discriminations are reported in the reserved Panchayats in Tamil Nadu and shockingly the chief posts are auctioned and the highest bidder is controlling the Panchayats bypassing the office of the elected representative.

Covid -19 crisis has brought the functionaries and values of decentralization to the fore, but at the same time economic crisis which is the byproduct of this virus has induced re-centralization. In dealing with the threat to personal health and livelihood of millions posed by Covid-19, the government of India decreed some rules and regulations. Is this the first step towards recentralization in disguise? Is India nudging towards re-centralization? The government's nudging tactics had critical public policy implications. Due to the use of 'soft' technique 1.3 billion people were convinced to abide by the lockdown at high economic and social costs and yet no anti-mask or anti-lockdown protest occurred. This can only happen in a centralized ruling system. It seems freedom of expression and movement are restricted. Democracy with shallow roots all over the world are in danger. It is felt that there is a virus in democracy. There is lockdown of democracy. Pandemic can cost international peace. That would be the greatest price to be paid.

To avoid the downside of centralized governance, a push for participatory democracy with more power to the local governmental bodies is gathering momentum. Take an example of managing the disaster from the centre. The orders for lockdown, ration supply and eventually supply of vaccines are delivered from the central government. But the question is, in a natural or person made disaster situation who knows the affected area and its inhabitants, who understands the community and reaches out to them, whom will the community trust? The answer is the local government. Its importance has proved beyond doubt across the globe. Efforts are being made to maximize citizen partnership, but it will only increase if and when their trust in government is restored. Also, how to communicate with citizens is the key for healthy partnership.

The interim relief efforts are managed and delivered largely by community and non-government organizations together with government initiatives. The provision of food relief is the answer to any natural or person made disaster, but the concept of food security and food sovereignty needs to be addressed for long term security for all.

What is next? The whole purpose of this international webinar was to bring experiences of success and failures in dealing with the pandemic on one platform, find our fault lines, exchange ideas for

improvement and plan for the future disaster management. Quite a few points were raised by the scholars and distinguished speakers. We need to learn from the past experiences of health emergencias. We are obliged to identify gaps in our actions, lack of foresightedness, insufficient collection of credible data and its analysis, inadequate involvement of multiple stakeholders and equitable distribution of resources.

It was felt that Local governments need to be innovative in mobilizing local resources, generate revenue and not rely solely on the state funding, increase their administrative capacity and collaborate with private sectors with public interest at the heart of it is the only way forward. Shabby state of present health care system is also magnified in most of the states, so universal and affordable health service for rural and urban dwellers and for all states is demanding priority.

In post Covid world we need to continue to create awareness, not just for health-related issues, but against misguided and unscientific information too. We need to start thinking about food security, poverty, hunger, livelihood, employment, sanitation and hygiene related issues not just as an interim measure but as a long-term plan. We better learn to view our health in a holistic way. It's not an absence of disease, it's physical, mental and social wellbeing. It was also pointed out that we should not accept vaccine as a panacea for everything. To develop a support system for the future, we need to define and refine our ad hoc health system.

From the Vice Chancellor and faculty of Central University of Kerala an appeal was made to come up with a solution and resolution with a long-term plan to deal with future pandemics. All stakeholders are urged not to stop here, and work towards the desired outcome which is to draw a policy document for re-thinking of the role of decentralized system in post Covid 19 world. To achieve this goal more scientific and critical studies with empirical evidence and reliable data base are required to establish and substantiate a strong correlation between local governments and their impact in efficacy in management of Covid 19. It was suggested that institution of higher education and advocates of decentralization and local governments should conduct in-depth research and scientific study in this field. Plan can also be drawn for decentralization activists to lobby with ethical and moral values to the governments and policy experts of international agencies to provide incentives and empower grassroots level governments.

Listening to number of people representing various ideologies and following different principles one cannot help but to feel overwhelmed by the richness of their expertise. One common goal was to safeguard the lives and livelihood of all the people in our world. The essence of the webinar can be summed up in these words: Gandhi's concept of true Swaraj lies in empowering the villages. To make them self-sufficient he propagates Khadi and village industries. He also gave a directive to the rulers to depend on the will of people and be their servants. He also stressed that village economy is the most important and it should be made robust. This can be our guiding tool for planning for a better world beyond Covid 19.

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Reference

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