



VILLAGE GOVERNMENT: A Concept that Needs Attention

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National Geographic defines village as “a small settlement usually found in a rural setting. It is generally larger than a hamlet but smaller than a town.”

The definition of a village varies from country to country. Nonetheless, villages are important units in any country and play a vital role in development when they have a well-structured system. Village government is a crucial yet often overlooked part of society. It is responsible for providing essential services to its residents and can play a key role in promoting economic development and social progress. However, village governments often lack the resources and authority they need to be effective. This article will explore the importance of village government and argue that it deserves more attention from government.

Firstly, the central or provincial government requires data to formulate policies aimed at addressing the challenges in rural areas, as it is not feasible for them to physically visit every village and conduct surveys. Therefore, establishing village governments helps in conducting surveys and providing crucial data. Additionally,

village governments play a significant role in the formulation, implementation, monitoring, and reporting of projects to the authorities. Since each village has its own traditions, cultures, and values, they possess unique systems for addressing challenges within their communities. The villagers are in the best position to understand the needs of their residents, surpassing anyone else, and can better formulate policies that effectively address those needs. Therefore, if provided with the necessary resources and authority, village governments can greatly contribute to improving the socio-economic conditions of rural areas. For example, the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) started a community-based development approach in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) in the early 1980s. They formed community-based organisations (CBOs) and village organisations (VOs) in all districts of GB. AKRSP believed that if rural communities were provided with the necessary financial capital, they would have the potential to plan and manage their own development. After three decades, it is evident that rural communities are actively participating in their development and have achieved significant progress in economic and social domains. During COVID-19, the government of GB conducted surveys with the support of these CBOs.

Secondly, village governments can facilitate the provision of necessary infrastructure in rural areas. Just like cities, villages require infrastructure such as water supply systems, sanitation facilities, waste disposal mechanisms, electricity supply, libraries, and recreational grounds to enhance service delivery. In Pakistan, approximately 63% of the population resides in rural areas, and a majority of these individuals lack access to these essential services. However, if village governments are empowered and granted authority and support from provincial governments, these issues can be effectively addressed. In situations where problems arise, such as the damage of water channels due to heavy rains, provincial governments may take time to initiate repair work. On the contrary, village governments can promptly take action in collaboration with local residents, based on the severity of the issue, ensuring timely service restoration. For instance, in the mountainous region of Gilgit-Baltistan, water channel damages are frequent during rainfalls and subsequent floods. Since villagers heavily rely on these channels for domestic consumption, they cannot afford to wait for days, hoping that provincial authorities will intervene. Instead, they adopt a local approach. As soon as the water channels are damaged, the villagers collectively decide that one representative from each household will participate in the repair work the following day. Failure to attend without a valid reason results in fines. This practice, known as 'haldashiree' in the Shina language, demonstrates the effectiveness of decentralisation when local/village governments are equipped with authority and resources.

Village governments also play a crucial role in natural resource management. Villages are abundant in natural resources such as forests, gemstones, land, and tourist attractions. Currently, the livelihoods of villagers heavily rely on these natural resources. However, due to the absence of a proper governance system, these resources are being unsustainably exploited, resulting in their depletion and causing environmental hazards like Glacial Lake Outburst events and loss of wildlife habitats. The unsustainable utilisation of natural resources in villages is primarily attributed to a lack of awareness regarding their importance. It is impractical for provincial governments to individually visit every village and conduct awareness sessions to educate villagers about sustainability. Conversely, village governments, with the support of government agencies and civil society organisations, can effectively undertake this task. They can better raise awareness among villagers about the consequences of unsustainable consumption and conduct relevant sessions when necessary.

Similarly, village governments can play an important role in conflict resolution. In rural areas, strong economic and social interdependencies often give rise to land disputes, especially with rapid population growth. Although there are local methods to address these disputes, such as the "Punchayat" in Punjab and "Jirga" in KP and GB, there are instances where these practices fail to achieve conflict resolution. In such cases, a formal government system supported by local governance can be effective.

Another prevalent issue in villages is sexual harassment. Given the male-dominated nature of these communities, girls and women often hesitate to speak up, allowing perpetrators to go unpunished. By establishing a village government system in collaboration with civil society, these matters can be addressed, and perpetrators can be brought to justice through legal channels.

As mentioned earlier, villages are rich in resources, presenting vast business opportunities for the youth. When exploring agriculture-driven businesses, areas such as organic and livestock farming, agribusiness, and agriculture tourism come to light. However, the youth face various challenges when starting their businesses, including financial issues, lack of training, limited access to technology, and unfavourable environments. In this regard, village governments, in collaboration with provincial governments and NGOs, can provide support to address these challenges. This support can come in the form of interest-free loans, training programs, educational opportunities, and the acquisition of skills and knowledge necessary for starting sustainable small-scale businesses. Additionally, village governments can assist entrepreneurs by providing access to markets, thereby improving the economic conditions of the people and generating employment opportunities for unemployed youth. Moreover, village governments can play a crucial role in promoting technology development within villages. Considering the current climate crisis, the youth can be encouraged to invest in green businesses, which can contribute to addressing the climate crisis. Rural areas, despite being less responsible for climate change, are among its greatest victims, as exemplified by the recent floods in Pakistan.

Finally, village governments should not operate without an accountability system. They should be granted the freedom to function independently, while also being subject to an accountability mechanism for their actions and decisions. This ensures responsible governance, transparency, and the establishment of trust among the people. Moreover, an accountability system promotes the efficient utilisation of resources and helps prevent corruption, wasteful spending, and mismanagement. Additionally, village governments play a crucial role in the socio-economic development of rural communities. By recognising their significance and providing them with the necessary resources and authority, the government can unlock the full potential of these local governing bodies. Empowered village governments enable us to build stronger, sustainable, and prosperous rural societies that contribute significantly to the overall development of our country.

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