

## **NHG Women Linkage with Local Planning: Understanding and Practice in Kerala**

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**Abstract:** NHG-Local government linkage looks forward to bring about synergistic implementation of programmes in health, agriculture, micro enterprises, social justice and women empowerment. Local government considers the social network of NHGs as the most effective and the cost saving mechanism for making participatory planning process with utmost reliability. Its ground level network envisages decision making bodies more participatory. Kudumbasree implements poverty alleviation programme through NHG women and the latter are the best agents to explore the poor and report their needs to the LG. They conduct multilevel divergent programmes on behalf of the local body in health, sanitation, poverty reduction, child welfare and communication. The formation of NHGs facilitates integration with the plan objectives such as agricultural production, poverty reduction, social equity and women empowerment and eventually revamps the entire system of local governance

**Keywords:** Area Development Society (ADS), Community Development Society (CDS), Local government (LG), Local planning, Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs)

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### **I. Introduction**

Prior to the decentralised planning, women's agency was credited for the impressive performance of Kerala state's social indicators, which unequivocally equated the development experience of the developed countries. In the post-nineties, women's agency materialized a new outlook rooted in the network of women SHGs which animated new vistas of development like associational life, social capital and women empowerment. Local planning contributes to empowerment by increasing the capability of local actors to choose among a broad set of options in pursuit of individual and collective goals [1]. The empowered local actors contribute to governance process and this enriches development process. The present study shows, how the local government utilizes neighborhood groups (NHGs) of women to take up the role of empowered local actors in local planning.

### **II. Analytical Significance**

Formation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women was a big step in the economic empowerment of women. Over the time, the mode of operandi of SHGs did not go in tandem with the empowerment objectives, therefore, a paradigm shift in planning was made with the manifold objectives of giving voice with power to the women and transforming them as agents of change. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendments introduced decentralized methodology in local planning. The state government of Kerala designed this novel concept by envisaging greater participation of women in planning and preference to projects focusing strategic gender needs. The local planning ensures woman entitled to have her voices heard and influenced decision making units and initiate the growth of Neighbourhood groups under Kudumbasree network which play a vital role in nurturing associational life and social network.

### **III. Objective Of The Study**

*The major objectives of the study are (a) To know the structure and functions of NHGs in Kerala  
(b) To study how NHGs have been utilised as effective chain of network in implementing local planning.*

### **IV. Methodology Of Study**

The population of the present study consists of NHG women who participate in local governance in the panchayats of Thrissur district. The district has the reputation for a series of rigorous programmes done by local bodies and grassroots organizations of women. In this regard, the district has attained many state and national level awards. The survey was conducted among the representatives of NHGs of all 88 gramapanchayatsof

Thrissur district, on the occasion of district level programmes conducted by Kudumbasree Mission at Thrissur. In total, 189 NHG women participated in the survey.

### **V. Nhgs Convergence With Local Government(Lg)**

The then state government started on a massive campaign to propagate the methodology of decentralised planning with special focus on the principles of transparency, people's participation and gender equity. In every training session, gender priorities were stressed. The NHG network was activated after the inauguration of decentralized planning in 1996. In 1998-99, it was mandated that all the local bodies should set apart 10 per cent of plan funds exclusively for women empowerment projects. This necessitated the local bodies to bridge local government with women community development societies (CDS) to determine the plan of action. This mandatory allocation initiated mushrooming of grassroots women SHGs. These SHGs later were integrated with Kudumbasree, which is a large network of SHGs of poor women initiated by the Government of Kerala, in 1998. Kudumbasree in each local body was brought under the management of concerned local government. Now Kudumbasree was set up in all the 978 GPs, 60 municipalities and 5 corporations of the state. There are 2.77 lakh NHGs, 19854 ADSs and 1078 CDSs with total membership of 4306975, as on March 2017 [2].

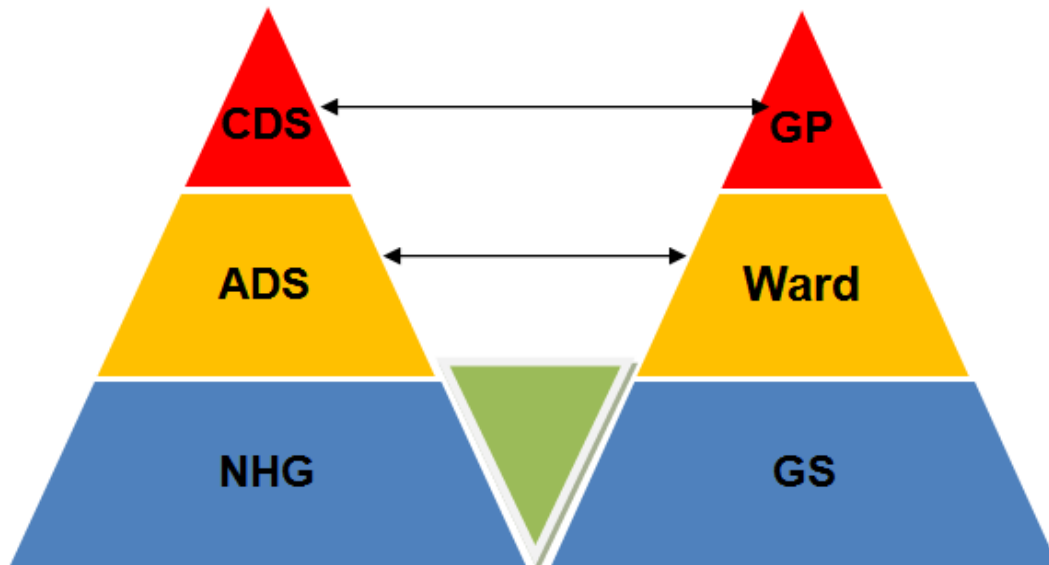
### **VI. What Is Nhg? How Nhgs Stands Different From Shgs**

The gender sensitisation in planning gave rise to Neighborhood Groups (NHG), a gathering of 20 to 40 women who lived in the neighborhood. This concept of NHG was a novel one as it swerved from the traditional World Bank concept of self-help group (SHG). The members of SHG have certain homogeneous characteristics in terms of caste, creed and party. Such homogeneity was absent in the formation of NHG and it was exclusively defined in terms of spatial attributes [3].

Generally, SHGs are supposed to pool the small savings of poor women and integrate them with banks to facilitate loan advances to their micro enterprises. Their collective activities and social capital strengthen their empowerment process socially and economically. Kudumbasree stands different from SHGs, though, they go through the same process of empowerment. The former is state sponsored SHG rooted in NHGs, the bottom pillar of local governance. The ultimate goal of Kudumbasree is poverty alleviation and women empowerment. The basic unit of local governance and Kudumbasree is the same i.e. NHG whereas SHG is the subset of NHG. It implies that there may be more than one SHG in one NHG.

### **VII. Three Tier System In Kudumbasree: A Replication Of Panchayatraj System**

A replication of three tier system in Panchayat Raj can be seen in the Kudumbasree structure. GS is the primary and basic unit where ward level needs are discussed and later forwarded to Gramapanchayat (GP) level. *Ayalkootam* or Neighborhood Group (NHG) is the basic tier. The NHGs are federated into Area Development Society (ADS) at the ward level and Community Development Society (CDS) at the panchayat level. NHG is the basic pillar of both local governance and Kudumbasree (Figure 1).



**Fig.1:** Convergence with Local Government

Source: Kudumbasree National Resource Organisation

### **VIII. Kudumbasree Structure And Its Interface With Local Government**

This section discusses the structure of Kudumbasree federated into three tiers such as NHG, ADS and CDS. NHG is the lowest tier of LG and is functioning as grassroots organisation for direct citizenship in governance. NHG acts as a mass channel of communication between panchayat and the people. The unity and cohesion of NHG members is the backbone of Kudumbasree. NHG is based on the following activities which are considered its primary functions:

- Regular weekly meetings
- Thrift collection
- Internal loan advance
- Loan repayment
- Keeping accounts and minutes

NHGs can improve the quality of village assembly or Gramasabha (GS) through substantial participation. It is mandated that the ward level committee must have a representative from each NHG. In a study conducted on 100 panchayats, it was found that NHGs were carrying out all the functions of GS such as distribution of notices of GS meeting, discussion of the local plan formulation, review of project implementation and selection of beneficiaries [3].

NHGs generated a civic consciousness. The meetings of NHG members are conducted on weekly basis in the residence of any of the NHG members. The members contribute their thrift on regular basis and it is deposited in the nearest local bank and this amount will be lent to the members as loan advances. Micro credit is the pull factor for women to take membership.

The Twelfth Plan (2012-17) introduced Ward Development Committee<sup>1</sup> (WDC) in every ward, to facilitate appropriate functioning of GS. It consists of representatives from all the NHGs in a ward. The NHGs are supposed to discuss local plans and prioritise the list of beneficiaries in their locality. LG considers the social network of NHGs as the most effective and the cost saving mechanism for making the above mentioned process with utmost reliability. Prior to the GS, they discuss the needs, mode of action, and work plan of MGNREGS in respective wards. They can make valid suggestions, as they know each other very well. In brief, NHG is the most effective means for encouraging women to participate actively in planning process. NHG has the responsibility to assist beneficiary committee in project implementation.

In each NHG, five volunteers are selected for undertaking various functional activities.

- President
- Secretary
- Community Health-Education Volunteer
- Income generation activities (IGA) volunteer
- Infrastructure Volunteer

President and secretary perform administrative functions. The community health volunteer is in charge of ward level health related activities like immunization, maternal and child care, nutrition and propagation of

cleanliness, hygiene etc. The IGA volunteer finds out the sources of finance and opportunities for self-employment activities. The community infrastructure volunteer is responsible for basic needs such as housing, sanitation, drinking water etc. The five member committee of all the NHGs in a ward constitutes the general body and a seven member team was selected from the general body and it is called Area Development Society (ADS). It coordinates 7 to 15 NHGs at the ward level. The responsibility to implement MGNREGS in each ward is entrusted to ADS.

CDS is an apex body for coordinating the activities at the panchayat level. It is a subsystem of local government under which it acts. It runs programmes of various departments in tune with the priorities of the community. CDS works in association with LG and acts as channel between NHGs and LG institutions. It prioritises NHG and community needs and reports to the working groups and panchayatsamithi.

### **IX. Local Government And Kudumbasree: Common Platforms**

This section gives an overview of programmes of Kudumbasree which have direct linkage with the local body.

#### **9.1 Participation in Planning**

The sense of social responsibility and civic consciousness of the NHG members are great inputs to the participatory planning. In 2014, the state government introduced Neighborhoodsabhas and Ward Development Committees (WDC) to ensure the effective functioning of GS and these two institutions have their roots in NHG network. This section discusses the participatory role of NHGs in GS.

##### **9.1.1 Pre-GS phase**

“Effective convergence is possible only if, NHG members participate in GS” [5]. The NHGs acts as ‘crowd puller’ and it facilitates a fully packed hall for panchayat level meetings. Its wide network and ground level communication transmits the fruits of participatory planning in the reach of the laymen. In most of the panchayats, elected representatives use the network under Kudumbasree to circulate notices related to GS, development seminar and working group meeting on behalf of the LG. NHGs distribute notices of GS and application for selecting beneficiaries in the GS.

##### **9.1.2 Participation in GS**

The NHGs is instrumental in a massive participation in the GS. The unique feature of GS meetings in Kerala, is majority of participants are women<sup>ii</sup>. NHG women are the main participants in the GS. They can mobilize more women to attend GS and the outcome is the substantial increase in the number of women participants in the GS. Every NHG member is compelled to attend GS for availing benefits and getting information about new schemes.

##### **9.1.3 Participation in Decision Making**

The women participants outnumber their male counterparts in the GS meetings, development seminars and working groups and their participation has gone up considerably [5]. The CDS members attend the development seminar which is convened for preparing final plan document. All the CDS women are the members of working groups which are responsible to recommend policy to the standing committees subsequent to GS. There will be 10 or 15 working groups in accordance with the number of sectors like agriculture, animal husbandry, welfare, road, SC/ST development, women and children etc. Atleast one CDS woman is a member of each working group. The working group ‘Women and Children’ tackles the women empowerment which is dominated by CDS women. The CDS women who are supported by the grassroots organisations like ADS and NHG can supplement information to the officials and members for local development. Thus deliberations of Kudumbasree make decision making process more transparent and prudent.

### **X. Poverty Reduction**

Ashraya (Rehabilitation of the Destitute) is one of the mandatory projects executed by local body through Kudumbasree and latter is the implementing agency of Ashraya on behalf of LG. This programme aims at uplifting the poor and the downtrodden from the destitution. In 2014-15, NHG women in their concerned area completed the first and second- stage of survey and submitted the final list of the poor to the local body. It supplies necessities to these poor families regularly. The Kudumbasree members visit them, supply necessities and evaluate their standard of living.

The LG executes Ashraya, the destitute rehabilitation programme through NHGs members. NHGs assist LG to identify the potential beneficiaries who really deserve material support and thus beneficiary selection becomes easier and accurate. NHG Members scrutinize their applications and apply wealth ranking index to prioritise these beneficiaries. The working group discusses the problems and needs of each beneficiary and prepares a proposal. The CDS submits this proposal for the perusal of evaluation committee and the latter prepares the final list of beneficiaries and submits to the consent of GP council. NHG is the best medium for

identifying the poor. The information supplemented by the NHG members is very crucial in implementing the subthemes of the project like house for the destitute, food package, medicines, dress materials and other needs.

### **XI. Plan Expenditure For Women Empowerment And Income Generating programmes**

SHGs start varied kinds of income generating activities like canteens, caterings units, production of umbrellas, bags, jewelry etc. They are engaged in the production of baby food labeled *Amrutham*, and *Anganwadistake* the initiative to supply this to the children under age one in each ward. The panchayat allocates fund towards the production of *Amrutham* which is produced by the Kudumbasree units. NHG women are directed to take up micro enterprises, cultivation and other innovative programmes of government and non-government agencies. The support services of LG can address these issues proactively. In many panchayats, LG extends funds and arrange centres for the sale of their products. Earlier, the local bodies gave capacity building and skill enhancement training to these women. In this context, the GP can assist them through allocation of planfund towards meeting financial needs of the enterprising women appropriately. Panchayat can arrange marketing centers to assure sale of their produce on either weekly or monthly basis.

### **XII. Mgnregs (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme)**

MGNREGS is an employment generation scheme providing 100 days of wage employment to every adult member of rural household. Local government is the principal authority to plan and execute MGNREGS in a local body. The MGNREGS visualises convergence with NHGs and ADSs for massive participation of the poor and the unemployed.

The GS exclusively discusses selection of worksite, implementation of the work, wage distribution and monitoring of the work. ADS member is the mate of the each worksite. She is responsible for executing work in the assigned area. NHG and ADS members are involved in planning, execution, evaluation and social auditing. The NHGs serve the platform for discussing the nature of work, number of persons and work days and selection worksite. The ADSs codify these suggestions at the ward level and the local body call for special GS to invite suggestions. In the same GS or general GS, the MGNREGS action plan is discussed. The working groups consolidate these ward level recommendations into action plan of the local body. Vigilance & Monitoring Committee (VMC) monitors the works of MGNREGS force. VMC members are selected mostly from NHG women who have attended the GS. The members of VMC visit the worksite, assess the work done and report to the mate and LG.

### **XIII. Collective Farming**

In many local bodies, Kudumbasree in association with LGs have promoted agricultural ventures of women through distinct ways. In 2010, Kudumbasree introduced Joint Labour Group (JLGs) or group farming done by 4 to 10 women. In 2014, the Government of India introduced *MahilaKisanSashaktikaranPariyojana* (MKSP) with an aim to empower women farmers. The local government in many panchayats integrated MKSP with JLGs and allocated plan fund towards them. In consultation with the NHG women, the local government selects land for cultivation, supplements raw materials and other inputs, and arranges machinery for mechanised cultivation. The local body and MGNREGS linkage in agriculture has caused an exponential increase in women cultivators. NHG-LG linkage is a great support in mobilizing inputs and finding sources of land for cultivation.

### **XIV. Community Health**

Kudumbasree has a health volunteer in each NHG and she helps the local body to implement the latter's initiative at the local level. Every panchayat has a palliative care unit and the NHG health volunteer identifies the bed ridden patients and local body supplies medicines if necessary uro bag to them. The health volunteer conducts awareness programme on epidemics and propagates preventive health care measures in their neighborhood area. 'Clean Kerala' is one of the prestigious programmes of Kudumbasree. Waste management by Kudumbasree makes village/town clean and healthy. Many local bodies provide support services to their innovative endeavor and treat the women who collect, transport and segregate the solid waste in the panchayat area with courtesy. In Adatpanchayat situated in Thrissur district, the local government set up waste management plants and allocates a lumpsum amount as honorarium towards NHG women who engaged in this work.

### **XV. Nhg Women In Local Planning Process: Analysis**

Participation is the crux of local planning. The concept of participation is beyond the purview of physical presence and it implies involvement in the decision making units of planning. According to the GS minutes reports, women's participation in GS exceeds more than 60 per cent in all the local bodies of Kerala. The MGNREGS caused a steep rise in the participation of women in GS. The present study shows that majority of NHG women around 76 per cent regularly participate in the GS. Earlier, ward members had to take immense effort to make the women to attend GS. After launching MGNREGS, women show greater interest in attending

GS. The members opined that female participation in GS is closely linked with NHG network and MGNREGS. More than 20 per cent women are irregular participants in the GS and it is reported that household duties and family responsibilities are major deterrents of their participation. GS in the working days are yet another factor to hold them back. A few strongly believed that participation is required if and only if, their husband/sibling is absent. Some of them had strong conviction that only socially backward people who enjoy reserved benefits are needed to attend GS. In labour GSs, meant for MGNREGS workers, the women workers actively discuss the selection of the worksite, number of person days and types of job. The survey shows that in GS, majority had raised common needs like roads, street lights and public water connections. Some had proposed suggestions like better work arrangement, selection of worksite and supply of tools towards the MGNREGS work.

GS is said to be the ultimate body pronouncing participants' involvement in influencing decisions and selecting priority list of beneficiaries. More than 65 per cent claim that they have made recommendations in the selection of beneficiaries. In decentralised planning, the decision in GS passes through higher plan bodies such as development seminar, beneficiary committee and working groups, standing committees, and finally panchayat council. In the development seminar, volunteers, ADS and CDS members can attend. Half of them have attended development seminar and working groups held at the panchayat level. A beneficiary committee is constituted to select beneficiaries for various schemes. Around 38 per cent participated in the committee for the selection of beneficiaries.

Majority opine that the members are enthusiastic to invite them to participate in the seminar. Some of the respondents comment that the intention of the members is just to fill the hall rather than effective participation of women in true sense. Both the members and office are least interested to conduct the seminar from the perspective of gender budgeting.

### **Capabilities Generated Through Local Planning**

An active NHG volunteer gets immense opportunity to explore opportunities in the political domain and she later influences the local government in policy making. Approximately 28 per cent of women have membership in any political party and 15 per cent holds any post in the party. Nearly 10 per cent have contested in the last local body elections

Nearly half of the NHG women participated in the training programme arranged by the local government on various vocations such as tailoring, driving, handicraft, farming, etc. More than half attended awareness programme conducted by the local body on various subjects like women empowerment, health, alcoholism and problems of adolescent children.

Their neighborhood fraternity cultivates qualities of cooperation and cohesion among them. Their organizational power made them to expose sensitive social issues, like alcoholism and gender harassment to the lime light. Approximately, 80 per cent gained the capacity to speak before a gathering as an outcome of raising needs in GS/Development Seminar. Majority (72 per cent) admitted that the interaction with LG improved their knowledge about local governance institutions and now they could give basic information to the public who in need of any help from the LG. They acquired the organization skill which had enabled them to mobilize resources, organize for common aims and unite for collective efforts. The contact with LG inculcated interest in politics in respect of 40 per cent.

The NHG women associate with development programme of the panchayat like road construction, surveys, health awareness programme etc. The sample survey shows that 53 per cent have participated in the BPL survey on behalf of the local body. These next door women serve as the best agents to identify who are poor in the society and their ground level network was treated to be more reliable. They conducted first and second round BPL survey in every nook and corner of the local body.

## **XVI. Conclusion**

Kudumbasree is an organised well networked CBO converging empowerment and poverty alleviation under the direction of local government. NHG-LG linkage looks forward to bring about synergistic implementation of all development sectors viz health, agriculture, and infrastructure and women empowerment. Local government integrates with the women collectives to attain the development goals such as agricultural production, poverty reduction, social equity and local development. The number of women participants is very high in GS which is a constitutional body voicing participants' decisions in local planning. Although, the aforesaid strategic interventions open up new avenues for lifting the status of women, a qualitative research is required to assess their deliberations in local governance institutions and decision making, obviously it can narrate, to what extent these institutions are instrumental in empowering women and the problems which arise in translating innovative ideas into concrete projects targeting women. The knowledge about local planning, participation in the plan process supplemented by the organizational network of Kudumbasree enriched personal and political capabilities and induced her to explore opportunities and acquire capabilities. Kerala women, who

have attained wide recognition for shining social indicators and high profile of associational life, obviously can do sea changes in local planning and become the agents of change.

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[<sup>i</sup>] G.O (MS) No.112/14 dated 25.6.2014

[<sup>ii</sup>] See Narayana (2007); (Government of Kerala, 2009);(Rajesh, 2015)

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