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Initiative in Education & Lifelong Learning

Appreciation Programme

Participatory Social Audit: A Tool for Social Accountability

Module - II

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Introduction and Objectives

Introduction

During the recent past, it has been observed that there are a number of organisations, in different parts of the globe that are conducting audits every year in their respective countries albeit in different forms. However, it is important to understand the line of difference between financial and social audits. In the absence of a clear understanding about the perspective and purpose of social audit, chaos could occur at the local level, which could further weaken institutions established for purposes of governance, especially in the context of delivery of development services.

Objectives

This module will help learners understand:

- Statutory provisions in India, that promote accountability in public life
- Different steps of social audit
- Capacities that are required to conduct a social audit
- Different forms and sources of data
- Tools for *gram sabha* mobilisation

Unit 1: Social Accountability And Statutory Provisions

1.1 Social Audit Movements

During the first decade of the 21st century, several movements began throughout the world, to promote the need for accountability in public life. The governments of some countries were also able to bring about new legislations and acts to promote accountability in their service delivery systems. This was the result of efforts made by social activists in countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Indonesia, South Africa, etc. through a sustained process of putting pressure on their governments, so that they could develop and enforce these special provisions.

1.2 Social audit and constitutional frameworks

In India, a number of Acts have been enacted by the government in response to the demand for explicit accountability provisions, to ensure transparency and accountability in the functioning and decision making of public institutions. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, Conformity Acts of different states, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) and Right to Information (RTI) Act are some of these measures. Moreover, social audit has been legislated in some states of India (since governance falls under the state list). To discuss the developmental activities completed during the social audit, two *gram sabha* meetings are conducted in the months of April and October. Article 243 (a) of the Constitution of India states that 'a *gram sabha* may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of the State may, by law, provide'.

A review of the Panchayati Raj Acts of some of the states shows that a *gram sabha* examines the annual statement of accounts and audit reports prepared by the Gram Panchayat for a particular financial year. The Panchayats (extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, commonly known as PESA, stipulates that only the *gram sabha* can accord the completion certificate for all village development works.

Do you know the various provisions made in the Constitutions of your country to promote social audit?

1.3 Social Audit Under Various Schemes In India

The government of India enacted the Mahatma National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), to enhance the livelihood security of households in rural areas of the country. As per the guidelines of the MNREGA, prepared and issued by the Ministry of Rural Development, social audit is an on-going process under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes (MNREGS). Through social audit, potential beneficiaries and other stakeholders of projects are involved in every stage – planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Article 17 of MNREGA makes provision for social audit of the MNREGA schemes by *gram sabha*. Article 17 (1) states that the *gram sabha* shall monitor the execution of works that are being carried out within the Gram Panchayat. Further, Article 17 (2) adds that the *gram sabha* will conduct regular social audit of all the projects under the MNREGS taken up within the area of the Gram Panchayat. Clause 3 of the same article states that the Gram Panchayat shall make available all relevant documents, including muster rolls, bills, vouchers, measurement books, copies of sanction orders and other related books of accounts and papers to the *gram sabha* for the purpose of conducting social audit. But it is also important to know that the MNREGA is the only programme run by the government that has social audit as a mandatory clause.

In the recent past demands have been made to the Government of India to have provisions for an inbuilt component providing for social audit in various other schemes for urban development, in order to make them more effective and transparent - these include drinking water, education health and nutrition.

Unit 2: Steps Of Social Audit

The MNREGA was launched in Chhattisgarh, one of the states of India, in 2006. The popularity of the scheme attracted the *panchayats*' attention in the district of Janjgir–Champa (it was initiated here from 1 April 2007). The *panchayat* wanted to begin working on projects under the scheme as early as possible. Karmanda, a medium sized *gram panchayat* in the Baloda block of the district, organized a meeting that passed resolutions to start several works under the scheme.

In the course of one of the projects under the MNREGS, a conflict amongst the people led to a social audit, of which they had learnt during awareness programmes, conducted by both government and non-government agencies.

PRIA, a prominent NGO working in this area facilitated this process of social audit with the aid of the community people, as well as the office bearers of the local government. In order to ensure the efficacy of the audit, the following steps were undertaken:

- Building of a conducive environment
- Formation of groups to conduct social audit
- Capacity building of group members on various aspects of social audit
- Mobilising various agencies for data collection
- Facilitating *gram sabha* for social audit
- Sharing of audit findings and follow up

2.1 Enabling Environment For Social Audit

A positive environment helps to develop a sense of ownership among various stakeholders. It also paves the way for long lasting impacts of social audit processes. To develop a conducive and positive environment at the field level, it is suggested that at least one meeting each be organised with the different stakeholders to create awareness about the scheduled social audit, as well as support the process at every stage. These may include but are not limited to the following:

- Direct beneficiaries of various schemes
- Indirect beneficiaries (other community members)
- Implementing agencies
- Office bearers of local government (*gram panchayat*)
- Officials of the concerned nodal government department

At least one round of meetings was organised with every group and stakeholder in Karmanda, to generate awareness of the objectives and processes of social audit amongst the community. These meetings also helped in identifying the key issues and focus of the audit.

2.2 Formation Of Groups Of Facilitators And Their Capacity Building

During the initial round of meetings organised to build the environment for a social audit, groups of local community may be identified, who can be assigned the task of carrying forward the social audit processes. In order to optimise the process, it is strategic to form village level Vigilance and Monitoring Committees (VMCs) to facilitate this process. An important criterion used in the selection of members to be a part of a VMC should be their unbiased nature and commitment to promote and strengthen the process of social audit. Each committee should not have more than 10-12 persons.

In case the numbers of people identified are, more than thirty, then it is prudent to form two or three committees.

In Karmanda, the NGO organised a meeting with the village level VMC to share the agenda of the social audit, as well as their role in the process. This enthused the members, as they realized the importance of their role and the impact their findings would have on the community at large. The members of the VMC identified twenty more volunteers from the *gram panchayat*, to join their committee. This exercise also provided an estimate of the numbers of people that required capacity-building interventions. A detailed strategy for conducting the training programmes was also developed, based on the existing expertise of the groups involved, and other skills required in facilitating the social audit process.

The training programmes conducted for the VMC members included:

- Information of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (Panchayati Raj Acts and Rules)
- Knowledge regarding guidelines of various programmes and schemes (issued by the state and/or the center) to be audited
- Development of facilitation skills for the smooth and efficient running of the social audit
- Awareness on the purpose of the social audit, why it was being conducted and how the findings could be disseminated and used

Participatory training methodology, using tools such as brainstorm, role-play, simulation, small group discussions were used and the participants gained a thorough understanding on the process of a social audit. Further, inputs on communication, conflict management, negotiation and discussion skills (with government officials, elected representatives, media etc) were also included in the training contents, giving the participants a holistic understanding of the issue and requisite skills needed for conducting a social audit.

2.3 Data Collection And Verification

Collection of data is a critical activity during a social audit. Collection of data related to any scheme, under social audit, also provides an opportunity to systematically arrange all the documents, at the level of the *gram panchayat* itself. Data could be in any form, including proceedings of meetings, bills, vouchers, documents, muster rolls etc. that could be collected through various individuals and agencies.

2.3.1 Collection Of Data And Use Of Right To Information Act

In Karmanda, data collection started after completion of the training and capacity building programmes. During the training, participants were informed of the various sources from where data could be gathered. Group members of various facilitation teams collected data from direct beneficiaries of the schemes (passbook), implementing agencies (muster rolls), Gram Panchayat, and the block office (sanction letters and other documents). Some of the information was also collected through informal group discussions and focus group discussions. Sometimes group members photocopied the data from original sources (like proceedings of meetings, resolutions passed by the *gram sabha*, technical, financial and administrative sanction letters, muster rolls, bills and vouchers).

In cases where data was not shared by a particular institution or agency, Right to Information (RTI) was used to obtain the same.

2.3.2 Verification Of Data

Collating and verifying the data collected, is as important as collecting the data itself. These processes were undertaken simultaneously, with some members being assigned the task of verification and others the tabulation of data to be presented in a simplified manner during the social audit meeting.

All the collected data was matched with the records of the beneficiaries. Team members verified the sites, measured the size of the workplace and ascertained the type of assets that had been created in the course of a particular scheme.

2.4 Mobilisation And Preparation Of *Gram Sabha* For Social Audit

Once the data has been collected and verified, the findings need to be shared with the larger community and for this, a *gram sabha* needs to be mobilised. Attendance of the maximum members of the *gram sabha* is important to have a participatory and meaningful discussion during the sharing of the findings of the social audit.

2.4.1 Mobilisation Of Gram Sabha

A date for the *gram sabha* meeting, in Karmanda, was fixed after consultation with the elected representatives of the *gram panchayat*, where the findings of the social audit were to be shared. Slogans, writings on the wall and various other methods, including distribution of pamphlets were deployed to inform people about the date and time for the *gram sabha* and to mobilise popular attention. The objectives of the *gram sabha* meeting, including the sharing of the social audit report were highlighted in these slogans and wall writings. Members of facilitation groups visited different wards of the *gram panchayats* and informed people about the proposed *gram sabha*. They organised focus group discussions with the direct beneficiaries of various schemes, as well as other local community members.

2.4.2 Preparation For Gram Sabha

However, before the *gram sabha* was scheduled, the NGO team found it important to hold a meeting to discuss various issues and allocate different responsibilities. These included logistical issues related to seating arrangements, audio and sound system, drinking water and toilet provisions, crowd management etc.

During this pre *gram sabha* meeting, roles and responsibility of different group members were fixed and some were given the task of documenting the issues that were discussed during the meeting and the suggestions that emerged from the community.

2.5 Facilitation And Sharing Of Social Audit In The *Gram Sabha*

While sharing of the findings is a critical element of social audit, it requires much thought and strategy, as conflicts may arise during this process, which need sensitive and tactful handling. As a strategy, it is advisable to invite people of high standing and credibility to the *gram sabha*, who would play an important role in maintaining a conducive and peaceful environment. The presence of such individuals including prominent media persons, representatives of upper tiers of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, members of the District Planning Committee (DPC) and other district level officials would be important for several reasons. It would:

- Support the ideology of social audit
- Highlight positive aspects of the projects audited
- Suggest improvement in current projects
- Identify steps to improve the functioning of government officials in the delivery of future projects
- Set a precedent to use such a platform to get the view of the community before the implementation of projects
- Promote transparency and accountability of local institutions of governance

In order to keep the discussion focused, it is advisable that only issues like provisions of schemes (e.g. MNREGS), entitlements under the scheme, expenses of the project and procedures to get entitlements and benefits from the assets created under this scheme be discussed.

In Karmanda, members of the facilitation groups and representatives of civil society organisations developed a strategy to invite officials from the block and district offices to participate in the *gram sabha* meetings. They also invited local people who enjoyed the respect of the entire community to engage in this process. As a strategy, the *gram panchayat* itself sent out the invitations letters.

The quorum of the *gram sabha* meeting was ensured before starting the discussion. The *sarpanch* of the *gram panchayat* chaired the meeting, which began with the presentation of the agenda, followed by an introduction of the invitees.

In order to ensure that the members of the *gram sabha* received information related to the social audit, the facilitation team prepared large charts, which were posted at the venue of the *gram sabha*, highlighting information that was to be shared and discussed at the meeting. The documentation team took up their responsibility of not only documenting the formal proceedings and the discussions that ensued but also recording the objections and comments raised by the people.

2.6 Plan Of Action And Follow Up

At the end of the meeting, salient points were shared with the participants. The Chair informed the members present that there would be a follow up based on suggestions and comments. Further, an action plan for the future was to be developed in the context of other development programmes, so that effective institutions of self-governance could be established in the Karmanda *gram panchayat*.

Summary

In this Module, we have discussed the constitutional provisions laid down in the Indian Constitution regarding the conduct of a Social Audit. Some of the most important ones among them include the 73rd CAA, the Right to Information Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act etc. The MNREGA mandates social audits be conducted on the government schemes, to ensure smooth running of the specific scheme and to arrest corrupt practices in the implementation and delivery of the scheme.

PRIA's experience as an NGO working in the Karmanda village of Chhattisgarh has provided a case study, based on which one can learn about the optimal steps of conducting a social audit. The formation of Vigilance and Monitoring Committees (VMCs), the collection of data, the mobilization required for the *gram sabha* are all given in detail, which help in strategizing the conduct of an effective social audit.

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