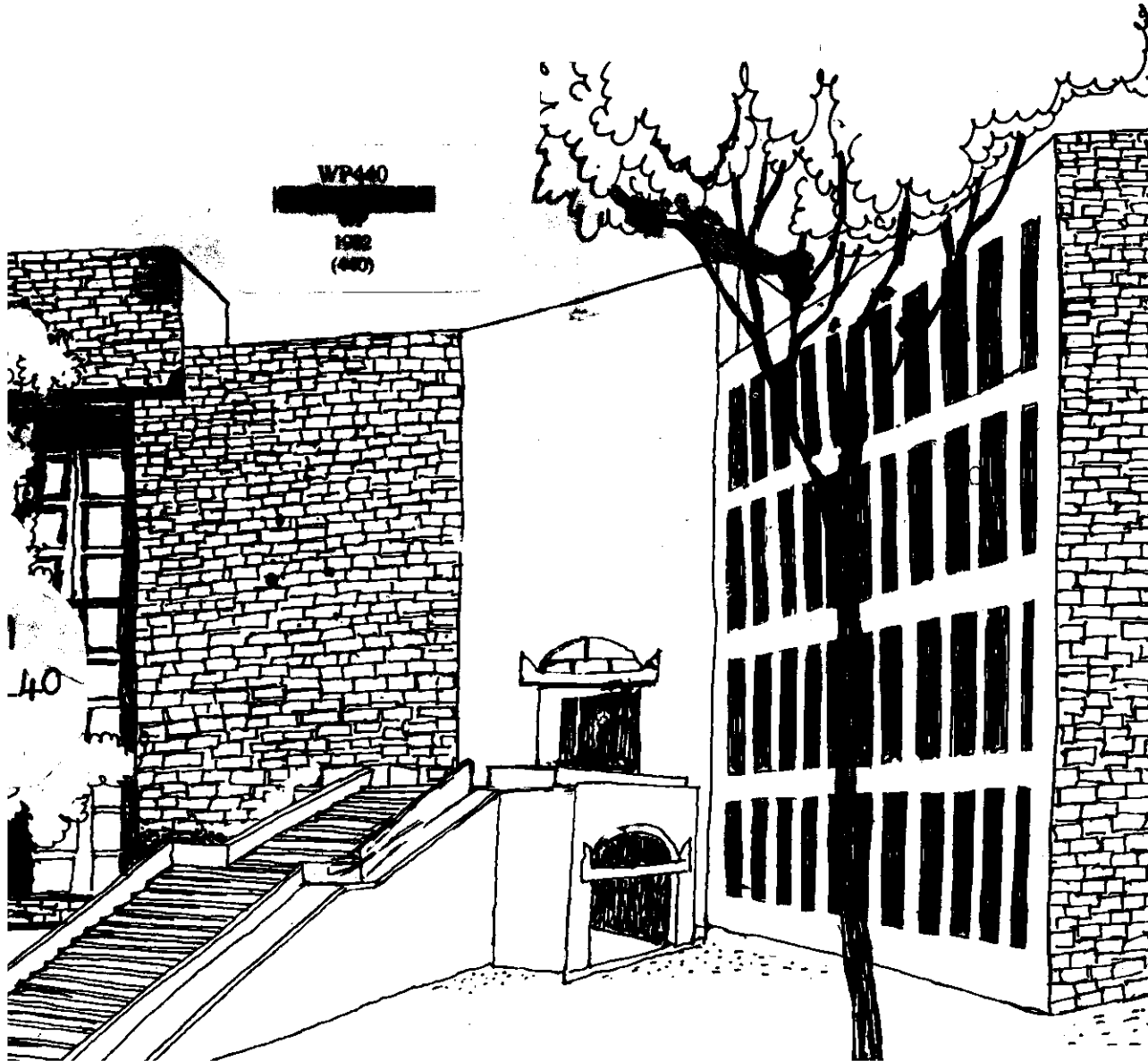




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# Working Paper



ACTION RESEARCH FOR MICRO LEVEL  
PLANNING: A SELF APPRAISAL

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ACTION RESEARCH FOR MICRO LEVEL PLANNING :  
A SELF APPRAISAL

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Purpose

An apex national institute\*\*\* in collaboration with some other Institutes in the country was involved in an experiment designed to improve the capabilities of planning and implementation among local level officials. It was assumed that improved capabilities among these officials would lead to changes in district administrative organization and its procedure. This experiment was tried in six districts of the country for three years. This paper describes the process adopted in undertaking this work and attempts to analyse the experiences of the researchers.

The problem of developing capabilities at the local level for planning has concerned the national planners from the very beginning of planned development effort in India. The expression of this concern, however, underwent a shift from decentralised participation oriented planning approaches in the first three Five Year Plans to centrally administered and directed intervention strategies in the later plans. From people's organizations like Panchayati Raj or cooperatives, attention moved to bureaucratic special agencies sponsored by the Government of India to plan and implement local development programmes. Backward groups were sought to be helped through such specialised agencies.

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The Report of the Task Force on Integrated Rural Development (1973) and the mid-term Appraisal of the Fourth Five Year Plan recommended an institutional framework to take care of those areas that were afflicted by chronic drought. The Drought Prone Area Programme was consequently initiated for 74 districts in the country and planning and implementation of the programme at the district level was entrusted to a special agency. This agency did not form part of the regular district administration but was established as a registered body with the District Collector as Chairman. Because of its autonomous character, all personnel working in the agency were formally sent on loan from the Government to the agency. The major aim of this agency was to merge "integrated area development" approach with "target group oriented" efforts towards poverty alleviation. Stability in the income of the people, particularly those from the weaker sections was sought to be achieved by this agency through optimal utilization of land, water and livestock resources and through restoration of the ecological balance. The agency reflected a basic shift from approaching drought as an emergency when hurriedly conceived rural works programmes were implemented as relief measures to a well planned preventive effort that would avoid this wastefulness and inefficiency.

For this well planned preventive effort the agency was enjoined to provide a new way of administrative functioning. As land, water or livestock resources were managed by different departments having their own priorities and programmes, they prepared their projects for implementation in the district independent of each other. The agency was required to develop inter-sectoral and inter-departmental project formulation ethos that served the interests of the district as a whole.

However, it soon became clear that the agency was not equipped to undertake this kind of work in a sustained manner. There was a small professional staff provided to agency. All the investment of the sectoral departments did not flow through this agency. It was spending only that money that came to it through central and state government funding provided

specially for DPAP. The result was that from the very beginning the capacity of the agency to look at the district as a whole was seriously impaired with substantial amount of funds and number of personnel being placed outside its purview. Nevertheless, the expectations from this agency continued to be of systematic drought proofing and integrated area development.

It is within this context of high expectations and limiting constraints that the idea emerged of providing support to these agencies in their professional tasks of planning. It was suggested in the Ford Foundation grant proposal that District Planning Cells should be established on an experimental basis to provide among others (a) Management skills into local project formulation and implementation; and (b) a focal point from which the tasks of improving district administration could be undertaken. The intention was also to explore whether the district administrative system would accept and sustain a professional cell whose sole task was to intervene at that level to bring about improvement in the processes of planning and implementation.

#### Financial and Institutional Arrangements

The clear articulation of the need to find ways to support the agency tasks professionally emerged out of discussions among the representatives of the Government of India, the Ford Foundations and the IIPA. The DPAP was a centrally sponsored programme and therefore its implementation<sup>was</sup> a central concern. The states where the research was to be undertaken were consulted later, after the funding and the mode of research had been firmed up by the three concerned agencies.

Supported through financial grants from the Ford Foundation and the Government of India, six district planning cells - one each at Jodhpur (Rajasthan), Mahendragarh (Haryana), Panchmahals (Gujarat), Kurnool (Andhra Pradesh), Ramanathapuram (Tamil Nadu), and Purulia (West Bengal) - were established in 1978 under the overall coordination of the Indian Institute of

Public Administration, New Delhi. Looking at the complexity of the tasks and the varied roles that were to be undertaken, three of these cells were linked for professional guidance and administrative coordination to Institutes other than the IIPA. Such a linkage was established between the Panchmahals cell and the Sardar Patel Institute of Economic and Social Research at Ahmedabad, the Kurnool Cell with the National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad, and Ramanathapuram Cell with the Institute of Financial Management and Research, Madras.

The grant proposals also envisaged that these District Cells would work under the overall administrative supervision of the DPAP agency. This, they hoped, would help in providing the necessary linkage with district administration without breaking the professional relationship with institutes. The professional staff for the cell was to be recruited for a three-year period which was the financial life of the project. It was hoped that the state government would finance the cells after this initial period was over. The professional staff was to be recruited from several specializations which included those of project planning, management, sociology, engineering, soils/agronomy, forestry, animal husbandry and extensions.

In actual practice, different cells came to acquire different sets of professionals. Even the number of professionals employed by each cell differed. This happened for several reasons. Action research perspective demanded people who would not merely be interested in producing academic reports but would be committed to bring about changes in a system which was at times both rigid and inhospitable. Such people were not always easy to find. The three-year contract period and the temporary nature of the project appointment was also a deterrent especially as the link institutions were not able to assure jobs to this staff on a long-term basis. In some cases it was felt that these institutions could offer compensating salary to overcome these disadvantages. But this could not be done too because of rigidity of rules and regulations. Thus, despite repeated efforts, neither at any link institution nor at any cell level could the full complement of professional staff be recruited.

### Task Sequence

The formal objectives of the cells were operationalised into a work plan that was phased out to cover the three-year period of the project. The first phase of six months was marked out essentially to get acquainted with the district, its environment and its organizational framework. Studies that would take stock of the situation through analysis of existing information and data were encouraged. The second and third phase, lasting for about eighteen months, were to be used to prepare and formulate projects and help the district staff to implement them. This second phase was for the direct involvement of the project professionals in the planning and implementation of DPAP projects. During this period, the effort was to identify the reactions of the local administration to this kind of intervention. This was the crucial phase of the project for the way the project professionals went about their task in this phase determined the final phase, in which the effort was to institutionalize the improved methods of project formulation and implementation. The last phase was, therefore, devoted to developing guidelines for future project planning, training the district officials and consolidating the research findings for district use.

Even though the formal objectives of the project were operationalized into a work plan that was phased out to cover the three-year period, the varied nature and quantum of the professional strength at the cell level and at the link-institute level strongly influenced the way the work proceeded. The work was further influenced by the differing socio-economic, political, administrative and ecological contexts of each district. The result was that different cells chose different strategies to achieve the same project objectives. Probably the strength of the project lay in deviating from the blue-print. The complexity of the ecology of the districts, the administrative milieu of the implementing agencies, perceptions of those who set themselves up as change agents and the imperfect understanding of how the governmental and planning systems work, all combined to prevent the total application of a blue-print of pre-conceived interventions in a pre-

judged district system. In some senses, then, the whole project unfolded itself as knowledge and experience grew and the work plan and work methodology responded to the changing situation.

It is important to emphasize the adaptive process in the unfolding of the project, because from the very beginning, little faith was placed on strict adherence to a pre-conceived plan of action. In fact, flexibility of this nature was accepted as a method of developing the capability to deal with effort.

There was consistent demand from the district cells to share information among themselves and learn from each others mistakes. Unfortunately, time was a serious constraint in regularizing an internal information system. However even without a formal informal system, a lot of information and ideas were exchanged. Thus, the work plan in all the three phases was constantly debated and redesigned. The half-yearly meetings of the project staff, district and state level officials, link institutes and the IIPA were used as a forum for exchange of information and debate. This was also the forum in which the work plan was constantly debated and redesigned. This was supplemented by visits from the central cell at IIPA to the districts and among the district professionals themselves which strengthened the informal information exchange process. One of the most noteworthy features of the project has been this capacity to formulate and to reformulate the objectives within the ultimate goal of institutionalizing planning culture at district level.

#### The Process and the Administrative Milieu

As indicated in the work plan spread into four phases, the action research involved three distinct but inter-related processes. The kind of tasks undertaken formed part of these three processes.

#### Legitimization

The basic and first effort in a project of this type is to gain acceptance of the cell as a desirable means of intervention. The relationship



between those who hope to intervene and those whose organizations are sought to be changed is often influenced by the images they form of each other. Even the assumption that change is desirable may not be equally acceptable to the interventionist and the intervened. Many a district official, for example, while accepting the need for change thought it was needed more at the state or central level than at the district level. Legitimization of a researcher's role could be accomplished through some or all factors such as: the relative academic advantages of the researchers, their capacity to stir change or through mutual appreciation by the researcher and researched of the need for change. The fact that the IIPA was entrusted with coordination and guidance of the project perhaps because it had done many studies in district planning helped to establish researchers' credibility. It is another story that expectations about transference to the district of academic experience of the IIPA or for that matter of all other institutes like NIRD, SPISER or IFMR proved far-fetched. Except for the project Coordinator and on occasion one or two other members of the faculty, not many who had done academic studies in this field felt inclined enough to get involved in such an experimentation process.

The capacity to stir change, as will be discussed later, was determined more by the individual commitment of the personnel involved as well as by the direct intervention of the coordinator rather than by any innate worth of the management techniques, skills used or the body of knowledge available.

The image reciprocity is a vital element of legitimization. Sometimes the inertia and hopelessness experienced by the grassroots level functionaries impinged itself so effectively on the interventionists that they too started developing inertia and hopelessness similar to that which existed already in the mind of those being researched. In other cases, through a continuous dialogue about and data-based analysis of the problems already identified by the researched organization, an understanding of district environment was achieved.

### Intervention

The designing of intervention was an extremely complex process. It had a direct bearing on the continued legitimization of the interventionist. Various structured and not so structured approaches were adopted - such as ; diagnostic case studies, sample surveys and involvement of officials in interpretation of research findings. Some more informal but at the same time more interactive approaches were also used. Through analysis of previously documented minutes of various district coordination meetings, the problems identified already by the district officials were taken upon for data based analysis. In this sense the intervention-design assumed a historical congruency. The deliberations continued about the way an identified problem could be used to intervene in the system. This sometime meant involving the officials in defining what data to collect, in what way and from what sources. The main intention behind various such efforts was not to solve the problems or create heightened awareness for the need for change but to identify the more appropriate problem-solving processes or procedures that could be institutionalized.

Before discussing how the process of institutionalization was perceived in the project, two important ~~issues~~ issues regarding intervention need to be mentioned:

- (a) the receptivity for change;
- (b) the initiative for change.

The conceptivity for change, as already partly elaborated under legitimization did vary from district to district. Apart from factors like the strength of the DPAP agency, the existing bureaucratic culture or the professional strength of the cell itself, one of the most important factors which influenced receptivity was, the authority from which the strength for designing and experimenting intervention was derived. In some cases, for example, the mandate from the state government was used to impress upon the district official the need for change and role of cell in effecting

it. In other cases, however, the cell did not have a sufficient professional complement and as such its role in designing or effecting a change was neither stressed nor recognized. The professionals from the link institutes were in some cases accorded a greater legitimacy by the officials.

Regarding the initiative for change, whenever and wherever a cell wanted to go it alone, even if the intervention itself had great merit, district authorities did not allow that effort to be sustained. In other words, it was possible to initiate a change and partly carry it through on one's own but the bureaucratic ethos at district level did not allow it to progress or be repeated because it did not consider such a strategy conducive to its own interests. The lesson that could be probably learnt from this is that even if intervention, as identified and designed by an outside change agency was valid, time should be allowed to pass until the initiative for it comes from the local officials themselves. The intentional delay, though tiring and frustrating for many young professionals, was discovered to have positive bearing on the institutionalization process.

### Institutionalization

Institutionalization idea at this stage was understood to mean the creation of conditions for the ultimate withdrawal of professional support for district planning. It was expected that individuals in the local organizations, by imbibing new knowledge and skills would develop the capability themselves to design interventions for changing the implementation system. Institutionalization of an intervention in forms of change in procedures and processes would also require appropriate government orders and/or a structural change in the organizations.

It may be mentioned here that with the project we were not absolutely agreed about what we wanted to institutionalize. There were differences amongst us on this issue, and some, for example, viewed the acceptance of the cell by the district administration as the aim, while others

viewed acceptance of certain decision-making processes, with or without the cell, as the institutionalization of management culture. Some also thought that any effort to graft an institutional set up on a district system would fail because the change at any micro level could not be divorced from the macro-economic policy framework. As mentioned earlier, some viewed the necessity of simultaneous changes at the central and state levels as necessary pre-conditions for sustaining at the district level or below even any process of change. In their view, the system had an extraordinary resilience to come back to its original form no matter what interventions were made at any time, unless these interventions also brought simultaneous changes at central or state level. Institutionalizing (within three years) a process of decision making that would call for an approach to problem-solving radically different to the one existing, was agreed by most, a stupendous task.

However, as already indicated, the administrative milieu in which the actions, based on the conceptual frame described above, were to be undertaken determined to a great extent that course of the project. For example, while we directed a lot of our attention on the District Collector expecting him to actively promote change, Drought Prone Area Programme was only one of his responsibilities. He had only a limited time available for future oriented programmes, especially as when most of the government operations moved from one "crush" programme to another. Nutrition programmes or Antodaya demanded immediate attention and if the District Cell could not provide expertize in planning schemes in these areas, placing the cell at the district headquarters was not of much use to him. Interests of the Collectors also varied. In one case, where a credit intervention was being designed, the District Collector remarked, "My interest is in social amenities. I want them mapped for the entire district for I believe if the infrastructure is provided development will follow."

A second characteristic of the administrative milieu was the high turnover of officials located in the local level implementing agencies.

Some District Collectors and Project Officers had very short tenures. Quite a few officers working in backward-drought prone districts considered it as a punishment posting. As such, while in the district, officers spent a large part of their energies in finding avenues to get out of the district. In such a situation, before a Collector or an official was ready to spend some time understanding the activities of the Cell, he had left for greener pastures. The Cell had to begin its legitimization processes all over again.

Another characteristic was that most sectoral agencies in the district work more in competition with each other than a spirit of cooperation. Departmental loyalties were strong and most coordination meetings were marked by this feeling. In consequence, the cell had to work in an inter-organizational network which had its own pulls and strains and often tended to involve it in its manoeuvres. The image of the cell usually suffered in the process.

Finally, an important influence of the administrative system that constructed the future oriented efforts of the cell was the appraisal system followed in the government. Agencies were evaluated on the basis of the extent of their ability to spend the amount allotted to them in the budget. The DPAP being a centrally sponsored programme had to respond to the Central Government's urging to utilise the allocations. The state government was therefore anxious that the professional staff be directed to prepare schemes quickly to exhaust the budget. Both the governments felt that the Cell's capability could be judged on its ability to help DPAP incur expenditure and not on its ability to train officials to submit viable projects.

### Structuring of Roles

The interaction of the Cell with the operating system and its culture led to the emergence of three broad styles in which the action research was conducted.

The first style represents the format in which intervention for credit planning was designed. Here the legitimization was sought by seeking the identification and definition of problems through repeated interactions with officials and farmers. Problems for research arose through such interactions. The reference to old documents like minutes of various district consultative committee meetings was also made, as mentioned earlier, so that the discussion of the problem had historical roots. The attempt at this stage was to get the officials themselves to identify the problems that needed solutions. Having got the problems from the officers the researchers collected data and went back to the officials with this data in an attempt to show that this may help in solving the problems raised earlier. The process of data collection itself involved the active help of the officials. They were then also involved in analysing and interpreting the data collected by the researchers. Thus, the researcher by involving the officials at every stage triggered off a thinking process which led to a reflection on inter-organizational relationships and on the strategy of credit plan formulation. It was hoped that such active involvement of the officials with the researchers will lead to changes in organizational procedures related to credit plan formulation and implementation.

In the second style, the strategy of intervention and the methodology of institutionalizing was modified by establishing counterparts for the professional staff among the officials.

In this case legitimization was sought to be achieved through discussions of case studies with the sectoral officials. The idea was that each cell professional would work with his counterpart in the concerned sectoral department and through this close working gain an insight about the actual planning process within that sector. Simultaneously, the hope was that such close interaction would improve the planning skills of the concerned official and therefore lead to changes in the institutional processes of planning.

The intention of intervention in this mode was that with close participation of cell professionals with sectoral officials, formal guidelines to prepare and implement projects would be improved. These improved guidelines are now under discussion with state and district officials. It is hoped that if these improved guidelines are accepted, systemic changes would occur.

In the third style, the district cells sought to work in close collaboration with the state level administration to establish legitimacy for its activities at the district level. When the cell did certain diagnostic studies or presented some district profiles, it sent these studies to the DPAP agency as well as to the planning secretary. The fact that the Planning Secretary was taking interest in the work of the cell impressed upon the district and planning officials the need to take it more seriously than they would have done otherwise. The Secretary's visit to the district and allotting exclusive time for reviewing the cell's activities in its office further reinforced its importance.

This way of articulating the importance of the cell led to the emergence of a kind of autonomy for the cell from the day to day district administration. The identification of problems in project planning and implementation emerged more through interaction of cell professionals with state planning officials than with district functionaries.

The styles of work may have differed, but the professionals devoted considerable time in all the districts to undertake research studies. (List of studies available with the authors). An impressive number were actually completed. These include socio-economic profiles of districts and in some cases of certain blocks, and process studies of planning and implementing projects. In certain instances, actual project plans were also prepared and in one district, the professionals were also actively involved in monitoring their implementation. In all the districts these studies were presented to district officials in seminars specifically convened for the purpose. In order to disseminate knowledge and information about the use

of management techniques in project planning and implementation, three districts started periodic newsletters. These newsletters elicited reactions on the work of the cell from the district officials too. Only one district formally enunciated guidelines for project planning. These are being considered for adoption by the state government. The cells have continued to work in two districts after the withdrawal of the IIPA.

### The Perspective

The idea of action research for improving planning and implementation of projects at the local level was based on the introduction of professionals through the cells into the district system. It was hoped that during a three-year period, such an arrangement will help develop individual capabilities among the officials which in turn would lead to systemic change. Locating in the district and giving administrative and financial supervision over it to the DPAP authorities, were conceived as methods of internalizing the role of the interventionist.

However, this also opened up several problems some of which have already been mentioned. Frequently, for example, it let the cell to spend its major time on projects that did not necessarily figure among its priorities. As is well known, there is a multiplicity of schemes at the district level and the District Collector coordinates all of them. The District Collector also happens to be the Chairman of the DPAP agency which is only one of his responsibilities. How much attention and priority he gives to the specific responsibility depends on a host of factors but primarily on his perception of the state government's desires and wishes. In such circumstances, when a priority programme was implemented, the whole district was galvanized. The cell was consequently easily sucked in. Indeed, heavy demands were placed on it because it had the expertise to plan projects and evaluate programmes quickly and professionally. Frequently when such "crash schemes" demanding immediate attention cropped up, cells sometimes started working on the same gear as the administration.



This resulted in the cell neglecting its future oriented activities. For example, an immediate task in one district was to prepare block credit plans. Any delay in meeting the deadline would mean an indictment of the district by the state government. The DPAP agency could not rely on its Credit Planning Officer. The Cell was asked to go this work. In keeping with the aims of developing district level capability, the Cell wanted to prepare the format, discuss its feasibility demonstrate the process of collecting data and leave the actual plan preparation to the Agency. This was not acceptable to the administration because of its own urgency.

Thus, the district administration looked upon the Cell as a ready resource for its intermittent 'fire-fighting' activities while the cells set their sights on a longer perspective. Some conflicts did arise because of this differing perceptions, but it became very clear that the District administration needed such a set of professionals who while maintaining their autonomy and linkage with modern planning techniques were able to support district planning activities. However, it was difficult to establish the extent and content of autonomy. The question was: When did autonomy, on the one hand, spur interveners and when did it alienate them, on the other?

Further, one did not get a clear indication of whether suggestions for changing the planning and implementation processes had been accepted. The district officials kept on talking of the need for transforming financial procedures, inter-organisational relationships or departmental hierarchical systems that inhibited change unless directed from the state or the central level. However, there seemed no general consensus either on desirability and efficacy of intervention at the local level or on the nature of such interventions. The project has been as such a one-side exploration attempting to answer the question: Where do we begin and how?

This would also imply that the responsibility for effective performance at the local level cannot only be placed on the shoulders of the last rung of bureaucracy. With the types of organizational hierarchies and departmental loyalties that prevail and the extent of decentralization that exists this responsibility has to be shared by the upper echelons of administration too. Consequently intervention at the "window level" where services are delivered or resources are allocated cannot be divorced from the way the services are conceptualised and planning for resource allocation is done. Most of the time performance at the local levels depends largely on the planning activities at other levels. Changes at the local level are tied intimately to these processes and cannot be institutionalized without concomitant support emanating from the higher levels. One weakness of the project was its inability to work at both the levels in such a way that linkages could be defined and established and the entire process of change and its implications identified.

Addressed in another way, we were not sure at the end of the project whether in order to introduce effective local level planning it was necessary to strengthen only the local planning and administrative machinery. Perhaps corresponding changes were also necessary at the state and central level. The intervention strategy that we had worked out did not take this question fully into account.

The people for whom the effort at improvement was being designed did not get explicitly involved in the action-research process although some conceptual headway was made in that regard.<sup>1</sup> a&b In fact much of

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1 a Gupta Anil K, "Social Effects" of rural projects : Monitoring through people's participation, International Review of Administrative Sciences, Vol. XLVII, 1981, No.3 pp.241-251

1 b \_\_\_\_\_, Monitoring of Rural Projects through people's participation, EKISTICS 291 (Nov.-Dec.) 1981, pp.434-442

the cell's interaction with officials and their organization was less encouraging than we had thought. Our intervention strategy also did not involve the local political leadership in the action-research process explicitly. In one district, the Panchayat leadership demanded that the cell should help in strengthening the capability of people's organizations in monitoring and preparing projects. The Zilla Parmukh felt that the strengthening of the bureaucracy to perform its role better may not be so helpful to the district. We recognized these conflicts but were limited by the pre-determined design for action research.

Finally, the evidence suggests that the action research undertaken was a rich learning process. We are still learning to cope with both the self-imposed task of a researcher and the social demand of bringing about change. More often, there is research with little action or action with little research. This has been particularly true for governmental bureaucratic systems. We hope that this analysis of our experience may be useful in further designs.